BORN BOY

Kupa Matowe

To Mbuya Hannah, my grandmother

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother for bringing me into the world, my brothers for being father figures and my sisters for carrying me on their back, while I cried.

Special thanks to my editor Jennifer Armstrong. Through her literary insight we came up with a story.

Madanha, you are surreal, a being only witnessed in biblical dreams whose subjects are of angelic nature. It requires a catastrophic nightmare for the dreamer to realize that you are real. Are you for real?

Chapter 1. Born Boy

For the people of Zimbabwe, the ability to speak English is considered a virtue. Every so often everyone, particularly the younger generations, strive to add one or two English words to their vocabulary in order to spice up their vernacular Shona or Ndebele. To demonstrate their proficiency in English, parents often compete to give children the most unique of English names. Zimbabwean children's names thus come in all sorts of nouns and adjectives; from car names, such as Chrysler, words parents have heard regularly on news channels, such as Famine, geographic places like Amazon or any other words deemed unique or fascinating.

The most popular names, however, are those that denote something good, noble or enviable. Names such as Pious, Pretty, Precious, Innocent, Courage, Marvellous, Prestige, Patience or even Good or Excellent, are common among Zimbabweans. Some names leave a third party wondering what had gotten into a parent's mind to

desecrate their children with such names. In my primary school for example, we had a very bright kid called Pigsty; a sad, mentally challenged boy called Urine, and a teacher's son called Doormat. My sister had a friend called Dampness while mother said she went to school with twins called Lavatory and Latrine.

There was thus nothing unusual when I was named Boy at birth. After all, every newborn boy in the village was Boy at birth until his name could be remembered. Girls too are all called 'Gero' at birth, the mutation a result of the missing letter 'l' in the Shona Language. Not only is the letter 'l' missing but it also requires intricate manoeuvres for the Shona tongue to pronounce.

"Do you children know why you Shonas' English is as heavy as the old-tire boots your folks wear in the villages? It's your lips. Too thick. Such thick lips interfere with tongue movements and the results are those sounds which you children call English. Hey *vafana*, *zivai zvinhu* (children know things)." My high school English Language teacher

used to say this when someone had accidentally read phrases such as 'Passengers were sitting at the back of a *rorry*' or '*chirdren* in drought stricken areas *battring* to survive.'

Speaking good English had then been every child's ambition in school. I remember the distinctiveness of some of the more zealous apostles of the 'Good English Gospel'. They were easily distinguishable from the rest by dress, hairstyles and by an attempt to speak 'through the nose', like the British, it was said. In school and at the university we branded these 'Good English Disciples' shameful zealots bent on assassinating our culture and nicknamed them *Masalads (*those who would rather live on salads). In retribution the Masalads called those who did not subscribe to their line of thinking, barbaric, disgraceful Bushmen resistant to change and nicknamed them *Masadza* (those who would rather live on the staple *sadza* alone). During the time I was at the University of Zimbabwe this issue often led to brawls and blows at the Student Union.

So, by virtue of my gender at birth and my mother's thoughts at the time I became Boy. When a proper name came, Smart, people had already got used to Boy. In addition, my mother, a village teacher, made the mistake of choosing a name spelt with an 'L'. Such names were never popular in the village since few could pronounce them properly. The majority of the people in the village simply did not give their children names spelt with 'Ls'. Those with a little bit of education, however, considered the ability to pronounce the letter 'L′ synonymous with an ability to speak good English and often demonstrated their 'educatedness' by giving their children names spelt with Ls.

My eldest brother had also been given such a name, Lovemore, pronounced *Ravhumoo,* and he rebelled. He despised the name so much that he would violently take issue with anyone who called him *Ravhumoo*. In the family we avoided such altercations by simply calling him *Mkoma* 'brother'. After my second brother Clever was born, Mother had avoided making the same mistake by avoiding

the letter 'L' in the names of my third brother, Misfortune and me.

I remember vividly the fondness I had for Mbuya, my grandmother. I clung to her like a baby baboon. I nagged incessantly like a woman enduring her first pregnancy. I cried for food, which was rarely available. On the few occasions it was available I cried for better. More often than not Mbuya would just ignore me. In retribution, I would refuse to eat for long periods of time, which had contributed to the development of a small, distended belly. The belly *per se* was not uncomfortable but it seemed to embarrass Mbuya, particularly at church.

In the village there was nothing unusual about bulging little bellies. Quite a number of small boys had distended little bellies. We even made a football team of distended little bellies. A team of 'pregnant' little boys with white, naked, little bellies with protruding belly buttons. Every afternoon during the dry seasons an assortment of distended little bellies would be on parade on the unused field behind our yard, chasing and kicking the Blue Seal mealie-

meal plastic, stuffed with feathers, rags, newspapers or anything soft to produce a ball. The dry August dust coloured the little distended bellies and their belly buttons white. White little bellies on malnourished little children. On the few occasions I joined in the soccer games Mbuya made sure such play was immediately followed by a bath with thorough scrubbing. She kept an assortment of small river stones for scrubbing off dirt. The dirtier one was the rougher the stone selected for the job. On one occasion she scrubbed me so hard that I thought my skin would peel off. She had been away for a couple of nights and I had refused to be bathed. Being scrubbed with a rough stone hurt but cleanliness was akin to godliness, according to Mbuya, and her Bible. Mbuya also made sure at least the bottom half of my body was always covered, a result of her intense Christian teaching. An oversized T-shirt was an ideal solution to a small boy's embarrassingly protruding little belly.

Unlike most children in the village I rarely went out to play. Rather I chose to stay at home with Mbuya or walk with her when she did her frequent

village rounds for the occasional gossip. Other children taunted me for following Mbuya around and called me 'Mbuya's two legged puppy' *kambwa kambuya kane makumbo mairi*.

Mbuya was a devout Christian, an upright, righteous woman who feared God and prayed incessantly. As I grew older I often wondered why Mbuya prayed so much. One of my sisters, Sekai, said Mbuya prayed so much because she wanted one of her grandchildren to go to England, to have a British education. Father Grey, the priest at the local church had said that having a British education was the nearest thing to being in heaven. As I grew older I had seen myself as that one child whom Mbuya prayed for. I saw myself in London, which I knew only as a place far away and full of white people, generous, rich, scattering money and goodies like the seeds of the biblical sower. Dropping gifts to the needy like Manna for the children of Israel.

Within the village, Mbuya was loved by many. Her greatest misfortune in life was being a single woman in a world that did not have much to give

such people. Mbuya had had only one child who, with the blessing of God had mothered thirteen children, I being the 6th. Mbuya never ever forgot to thank God for this bountiful gift of grandchildren, even though it meant breaking her back, toiling in other people fields in an attempt to feed us.

I vaguely remember talk of my father having been killed after a row with a white man. It is said he had gone into a 'white man only' baker's shop in Salisbury and asked for a loaf of whole wheat bread, which too was for whites only. This double act of mischief had angered the baker who had slapped my father hard, without a word. Instinctively my father had slapped him back, which had led to him being shot on the spot 'in self defence'. He'd died instantly.

Shortly after father died, mother married a local man who did not want her to take us with her. It was then left to Mbuya to take up the role of looking after my siblings and me. My memories of mother during those days are scant, but Mbuya, my siblings and I used to go to mother's house for Christmas.

Christmas was a time of plenty. We had tea, bread with butter and sometimes with jam; red sweet jam made from mixed fruits and called Sun Jam. I used to lick the tin once it was empted. This soon stopped after mother had given birth to a handful of more children by the local man, which meant I had ceased being the baby.

After Christmas, my siblings and I would reluctantly go back home with Mbuya where all we had was a round mud hut, thatched with cheap village grass that leaked miserably during the rainy seasons. Our hut stood tall on a small anthill. In stark contrast with my uncle's red brick house, roofed with expensive corrugated iron sheets, it faced the direction of his home unappealingly. The hut looked neglected, derelict, and destitute as if unashamedly announcing its need for attention. Grey river mud flaked pitilessly from the walls leaving large holes, which gave a clear outside view of the cow dung polished floor.

A fireplace, installed with three movable granite stands, occupied the central position inside the hut.

Behind the fireplace was a clay slab where a single bucket with river water sat on banana leaves, supposedly to minimize leaking. On the floor, on one side of the slab were a couple of clay pots, moulded from dark river clay and baked on red hot charcoal. A few old plates, all with an assortment of patches sat staked in a neat pile in front of the two pots. On the other side of the slab were two reed mats rolled together into one with a few folded old blankets on top. I don't remember for how long Mbuya had owned these blankets, but all but one, a recent donation from father Grey who was the local Anglican Church priest, were clearly threadbare. Directly in front of the clay slab was an old twenty-litre square bucket with too many holes to be used for fetching water. Inside this bucket was all the food we had at any one particular time.

Our hut was our absolute everything. It was our bedroom, kitchen, sitting room and storeroom. We even had our only hen, Huku, live in an old cardboard box behind the old mahogany door, which always stood ajar for fear the hinges would break if it was constantly opened and closed. My

two brothers, Clever and Misfortune slept on one side of the fireplace, while Mbuya, my sister Sekai, and I slept on the other side. My eldest brother, Mkoma and eldest sister, Charity, had both left for the city to live with relatives. Mkoma worked in a distant uncle's grocer's shop in Umtali and he had quickly assumed the role of a 'father' and was a role model for all of us.

The family loved Mkoma and he loved us. I remember how we used to wait expectantly when Mkoma came home during the Christmas, Easter, and the *Rhodes and Founders* holidays. Every Christmas, he would endeavour to bring something for everyone: An old T-shirt or a pair of shorts for the boys, a dress or a skirt for Sekai and a *doek*, a traditional head scarf, for Mbuya. Mbuya even had the luxury of lending *doeks* to friends who did not have.

Clever, the second born, had stopped going to school after completing Grade Seven even though, according to him, he had passed very well. His ambition had been to go on to secondary school, but

this was far beyond the reach of a family, which barely raised enough for a meal every day. Mkoma earned too little to afford school fees for Clever. As a result Clever stayed at home looking after our uncle's cows and goats, needful if we were to receive the occasional rations of milk and a little ration of meat when a beast was slaughtered, which only happened on special occasions. Animals were a treasure; they signified wealth, and were not supposed to be slaughtered without good reason.

I was very fond of my brother Clever. Clever was a quiet, reserved, fifteen or sixteen year old that had to take over the role of a father figure for the family after Mkoma had left for the city.

It was Clever who made the decisions on when to plant the crops, where to plant them and even when his younger siblings could start school. He respected Mbuya, like a six year old boy would honour a mother. It was Clever who set the example for all of us. Clever always expressed concern about our dire family situation, declaring that he would change things if only he could go to school. Yet, at

sixteen this was already becoming an illusion, which still, he hung on to. When it first started to dawn on him that the idea of him continuing school was just an illusion, a mirage, large castles in the air, he turned his focus on to me. In his hopes for his little brother he saw an outlet for him to express his frustrations, a product in which both Mkoma and he would invest in for the family future.

I did not understand the exact nature of these sentiments at an early age or why Clever intentionally or unintentionally began nurturing me like Earl Wood did his young son Tiger, who would later become the best golfer in the world: A four year old, holding a golf club as tall as he was. At age five, Clever taught me all sorts of little intellectual tasks, and then he would brag to other boys in the village about my intelligence. He taught me how to perform many simple tasks in English, such as stand up, run, jump, all of which I performed with meticulous ease. On the very first day he taught me to count, I proceeded to go beyond ten, all the way up to a hundred. When I achieved this feat, he was ecstatic. We went round the

village, with me, counting up to 100 to anyone who dared show any interest. After this demonstration, Clever decided to enrol me into school.

Chapter 2. School

In Rhodesia, before the country got its independence from Great Britain in 1980, African children were only allowed into school when they reached the age of seven. Primary school heads were known to have gotten into trouble for admitting children under seven. Even though he was aware of this, and I was far below the gazetted school age, Clever unilaterally decided to enroll me into school.

In the village school, prospective grade one pupils were to be interviewed by the school headmaster himself to assess their readiness for school. Children considered not ready for school were not admitted despite their ages. Some children only started school well above the age of ten.

Early on the morning of that year's interviews, Clever took me down to the river, washed my only decent pair of shorts, scrubbed me with a smooth

stone, asked his friends to look after the cattle and goats for him and took me to the school.

The headmaster greeted us with obvious surprise at seeing Clever bring such a tiny little thing for an interview.

'He is seven sir,' Clever lied. 'He is only small for his age, poor health sir. He is very intelligent sir.'

The headmaster looked at me. I looked straight back into his eyes with defiant confidence. This probably astonished him, but in effect it probably did the trick. He agreed to take me through the interview process.

I stood beside Clever while the headmaster and he spoke, in English. I understood quite a bit of what they were saying. I remained standing when Clever was dismissed from the headmaster's office. Clever had advised me to do so.

'Sit *dowwwn*, child!' The headmaster bellowed without warning. His authoritative voice made my heart leap. All the same I sat down on the floor, rather clumsily. The floor was polished with candle wax that smelt of paraffin. Some improvised floor polish I guessed. The red paraffin wax stained my shorts but this was the least of my worries.

'Very good, now *staaand* up.'

I stood up and looked at his forehead. Deep elongated wrinkles criss-crossed his balding black forehead with amazing uniformity. A sign of authority, and power, and money, I thought.

'*Juuump*.'

I jumped.

'*Claaap* your hands.'

I did -- a rather loud clattering noise from my little bony, malnourished hands.

'*Shuuut* the door.'

I did, cautious not to bang it. Clever had warned me against banging the door.

'Now, *opeeen* the door.'

I did and the door produced a loud, squeaky sound that made me hesitate.

He went on for what seemed a century to me asking me to do this and that. I got it all done with no single 'I beg yo pardon', which is what Clever had advised me to say if I had not understood something. The headmaster concluded his interview by asking me to count, which was the moment I had been waiting for. Clever had taught me to count up to 1000 and had instructed me to count to 100 if the headmaster asked me to count.

'One, two, three, --- ninety nine, one hundred--- three hundred.'

He stopped me at three hundred. He wore a lavish smile on his petroleum jellied face and asked

me to go and ask Clever to come back in. I was given a place in Grade 1A.

The story of my performance at the interview did the round in the village. When Father Grey told Mbuya that it was a noble thing for children to go to school at an early age, Mbuya praised Clever for his thoughtful behaviour. Father Grey said in England children went to school at the age of three, or even two, to prepare them for a long life of learning. It was called preschool, but it was school all the same. Even in Salisbury children went to school early, he'd added.

The day before I started school I watched Mbuya fumble with a knot which had been tied within an old brown sugar plastic bag. When the knot was undone there were a series of other knots inside. It took her quite some time before all the knots were undone. Inside the last knot was one red two-dollar note, *pondo*. She beckoned to Clever.

'Go to Tera and ask him to give you the shorts I had made for the little one. And don't forget to ask

for my change,' she said, giving Clever the neatly folded pondo. Clever ran and within a few minutes he was back. When I tried the shorts on after going to the river to bath, they were too long, oversized and heavy. The texture of the material was so coarse that one of the older boys at school had teased that my granny had stolen the material from a camping site, tearing it off one of the tents. He would laugh hysterically every time he saw me. Every break period he would come around our block looking for me. I had stopped going out of the classroom during break periods for fear of being laughed at.

'*Mwana waSatan,* he is Satan's child,' Mbuya said of him when I reported his behaviour.

In my class, four children from one family did all the reading, poetry and singing for the class during that first year in school. These kids had parents who worked in Salisbury and were always smartly dressed in well-ironed clean school uniforms. The teacher sang their praises, day in day out. I do not remember receiving any personal

praise from the teacher but I remember sitting within group one, which was reserved for the six brightest children in the class. I also remember singing to Mbuya and Clever, some of the songs that we learnt. The song I enjoyed the most was '*If ya happy endno*.'

If ya happy endno clap yo hands
If ya happy endno clap yo hands
If ya happy endno, then yo first show-ri-show,
If ya happy endno clap yo hands

If ya happy endno nod yo head
If ya happy endno nod yo head
If ya happy endno, then yo first show-ri-show,
If ya happy endno nod yo head

If ya happy endno stemb yo foot
If ya happy endno stemb yo foot
If ya happy endno, then yo first show-ri-show
If ya happy endno clap stemb yo foot.

The end of the year came after what seemed like a century. Time is almost stationary, I guess, when

one is young. On the final day of the school year, we sat in the school church, which doubled as a hall for most school activities. The top ten positions in each class, from grade one through six would be announced to the whole school on this very last day. The entire school gathered in the church to cheer those who had done well in their grades. In the morning of the closing day Clever asked me if I thought I had done well. I said I didn't know. The teacher had not told us our class positions. Clever said he would come for the closing ceremony anyway.

We all sat in the church waiting to hear the names of those who had done well. Our school was one of the largest in the district, having two classes for each grade from one to seven, each having at least forty-six pupils. The school itself was built of charcoal baked red bricks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets that stood out from great distances.

The church, where we gathered for the end of year proceedings, was a massive structure. Whilst

also built of red bricks, it was smoothly plastered both inside and outside and painted white. Massive, ovoid windows without panes paraded along the sidewalls of the grand structure as if perpetually inviting unknown patrons for service. A cluster of older pupils, who were mostly grade sevens, and would be going away for good, sat on the windows, ignoring the prefects' calls to desist. They disembarked only when the headmaster's team of marauding teachers walked in like a pack of wild dogs. The boys knew they would savagely thrashed if they didn’t move their buttocks fast enough, and with synchronized speed they disembarked, just before the teachers poured in. For me the church was a sacred and holy place. Those boys shouldn't have been sitting on church windows. I had later told Mbuya about it. She, in turn, told father Grey.

Clever sat himself on a bench at the rear of the church. The benches were reserved for the few parents who attended the closing day ceremony especially those who already knew their children had done well. All the children sat on the floor in front of the benches, directly below the belching

headmaster who stood on the pulpit where Father Grey stood on Sundays. Sekai, who was in grade six, passed by where I sat and taunted me as to whether ‘little Mr Know It All' thought he would be among the top ten children in his class. I didn't respond. The other boys just giggled.

The headmaster would begin the ceremony with a farewell speech for the departing grade sevens. After that, he would call out the names of the top ten pupils from each class, who would rise to stand in front of the whole school while everyone else cheered them on and the few parents ululated and clapped their hands. After the top ten pupils from each class had been announced, the headmaster would say his congratulatory remarks and ask the other pupils to cheer them on again before asking them to go back and sit. He would then move on and do the same for the next class until all the classes were done. As was the custom he always started with grade 1A and then 1B and continued with that sequence up to grade six. I fell asleep sometime during the headmaster's farewell speech.

A rapturous laughter jerked me awake. My heart missed a beat when I heard the headmaster belching, 'little boy, come up to the front.'

Immediately, I recalled how the headmaster disliked those who slept at school.

'*Ndinomuita kanyama-kanyama,* I will make minced meat out of him,' He said of those intrepid enough to sleep at school. The idea of being flogged in front of everyone terrified me!

'Go up to the front,' some older boys behind me were shouting.

My eyes searched vainly for my brother Misfortune. When our eyes met, he rudely shouted, 'Go to the front.'

Then I began to cry, which was rewarded by a roar of rapturous laughter from both the teachers and pupils.

Clever, wearing a serious fatherly face walked towards where I sat just as the laughter subsided.

'Yes, carry him up here,' said the headmaster, kindly. 'We need him up here. This is a phenomenal effort from such a small Tom Sawyer.'

Clever did as he was told, and hoisted me up into his arms like a tiny lamb ready to be sacrificed. Once again the school burst into rapturous applause just as Clever emerged at the front of the church with me in his arms -- This applause continued for a good five minutes or so. Clever continued to stand there, beside me. When he put me down, I clung tightly onto his hand.

'You came first,' Clever whispered,' I just stared at him. As if I had no capacity to hear or understand.

Chapter 3. The War

Word that the schools would not reopen spread like a spring veldt fire. This directive had come from the terrorists; at least this is what Mbuya was told by Father Grey. Sekai said they were not to be called terrorists.

'Comrades,' she said 'they are called comrades. They are our brothers, fighting to liberate our country from oppression. It will be called ZIMBABWE', announced Sekai, '--once we kick out all the white people. We won't be forced to make contour ridges in our fields, dip our cows at the dip tanks, or pay taxes. Education will be free, and you and I will live in a beautiful house of our own choice in a big city, and we shall have tea and cakes everyday, and even ice cream and chocolates, if we want'.

'Liar,' I said, 'all lies.'

'It's true.' She persisted confidently.

'Who told you?'

'Nobody, I just know it by myself.'

'Why should white people be kicked out of the country?'

'They make us work like horses.'

'You should be ashamed of your lies Sekai. It's Mbuya who makes us work, not white people'

'You brain is too shallow, you little sell-out'

'I will hit you Sekai, if you call me a sell-out. What is a sellout anyway?'

'Little skunks like you who like to slave for white people.'

'You talk like a terrorist's wife, you ungrateful pig. Father Grey gives us food.'

'Don't call me names -- you little slave boy who will spend his whole life cleaning Father Grey's shoes for leftovers.'

'I will tell Mbuya if you speak of him like that. He is a man of God.'

'Tell! And I will hit you so hard that you can't tell where the earth is.'

'You are all stupid, you and your terrorists husbands. You want to eat cakes and sweets but you want to chase away the people who make them.'

'Listen you little slave boy. Who needs that? We don't need them here and that's why the comrades will shoo the whites away like baboons in a maize field.'

'And you think the whites will stand there to be shooed away like baboons? Hahaha.'

I faked a laugh just to annoy her, 'Those terrorists will be squashed like little blood sucking

bugs the moment they show their ugly faces,' I said, squeezing my fingers to imitate the squashing of a bug caught in one's hand.

'Did you see how fierce those white solders looked when we met them at Marange Clinic? They looked as big as elephants. Your starved comrades, who survive on *nyii neshumha* [wild fruits] in the bush, like monkeys, will wet their pants at the stamping of just one gumboot!' I faked another laugh.

'You are so brain washed by Father Grey and Mbuya, you little rat.'

'Don't call me rat, you wife of dirty, evil terrorists, infested with fleas and lice.'

'Call me that ever again, and you will call Ian Smith to resuscitate you. She then slapped me so hard that I blacked out for a few seconds.

Later, I asked Clever about the war. Usually, Clever answered my barrage of questions with

enthusiasm, but the war questions seemed to make him uncomfortable. He seemed very reluctant to discuss the war with me.

'Clever, is it true that *macomrades* live in the bush and kill innocent people?'

'They live in the bush yes, but they don't kill people.' He said curtly. 'They're good people'.

'Who are they? Are they boys who have run away from home?'

'They are people, just like you and me.'

'And they live in the bush?'

'Yes, I have answered that question already. Were you listening?'

'Yes, I was. What do they eat, in the bush?'

'Whatever they can find, like birds and wild animals do – Sometimes, people give them food.'

'Why do they leave their homes to live in the bush?'

'You are still too young to understand.'

'And which homes do they come from?'

'They come from homes like ours. They are normal people like me, with little brothers, sisters and grandmothers too.'

'Do they all run away from school?'

'No, some of them are well educated. Some of them have even finished school.'

'And for no reason they choose to go and live in the bush?'

'It’s for reason, they are fighting.'

'Sekai said they are fighting the white people. Why are they fighting the white people?'

'Many things. The injustices of the white people in this country.'

'And who gives these terrorists the guns for fighting?'

'They are not called terrorists,' he responded, sternly. '

If I ever hear you call them by that name again, I will slap you. Do you hear me? They are called comrades'. It was the first time ever that Clever had threatened to slap me.

'I am sorry. I will not call them that again. Where do the comrades get their guns?'

'They get them from a country far, far away, called Mozambique. Sometimes from other countries too, like Tanzania and Zambia.'

'How do they get to all these places?'

'They walk. Sometimes for days. It's in these countries that they are trained to fight. Once they are back in the country, they hunt for white people and punch really hard whenever and wherever they find them.' Excitedly, he mimicked the sound of a gun. I had never seen him so animated before.

'But some white people are good people.'

'Not in this country. They use us like donkeys, treat us like cow dung, and they live like kings in our country. Schools, dip tanks and churches will be gone in a very short period of time. We don't need them. We are black people with our own values and culture.'

He was full of anger as if the whole issue was personal for him.

'The whites, little bro,' he continued, 'are bad people. They came here a long time ago pretending to be friends. They were welcomed. Then they started pushing us off our homes, our land. They took all the good land and pushed our people to these sandy soils where we live today, and called

them reserves. You remember what lives in a game reserve?'

'Monkeys,' I responded.

Clever laughed at that. 'Not just monkeys. All animals. And what is our reserve called?'

'Marange Tribal Trust Land,' I pronounced, recalling what he'd taught me during one of his numerous general knowledge sessions.

'Would *you* go, Clever?' I decided to ask, since he was loosening up.

'To Mozambique, to join the comrades?'

'If you stop asking too many questions I won't go.'

'Okay, I will stop asking too nay questions.'

From that day on, I noticed a change in Clever. He hardly had time for me any more. He came home late from the evening rallies where the

comrades were '*mobilising the masses*' about the war of liberation. Every morning he would wake up pumped up, and singing war songs. He taught me some of the songs, although Mbuya greatly discouraged such songs. The one he liked the most was *Hondo Maiona.*

Hondo Maiona
Maruza imi
Hondo yechimuranga
Maruza imi
Yakananga kusungura
Maruza imi
Zvizvarwa zvevatema
Maruza imi

The song, which meant the guerrillas had come in their might; to fight for the liberation of the blacks, could be heard all over our village as boys warmed up to the idea of the liberation struggle.

One Monday, early in the morning I woke up to discover that Clever had gone. Mbuya sat crying softly on a small reed mat just outside the door to

our hut. When I looked questioningly at her, she just uttered without looking up, 'He is gone, your brother is gone'.

Clever's departure left a deep scar in my heart and I cried for days on end, half-expectedly believing he would come back. I remembered all that had been said about the comrades, that the comrades lived out in the wild, like animals, and according to Mbuya and Father Grey, they killed people, innocent people.

'They butcher people with *pangas* like you do to goats,' Father Grey had mentioned. And he had added, 'It's quite a treacherous journey to get to that damn Portuguese place.'

I loved my brother too much to imagine him going on a 'treacherous journey', even though I did not know back then what ‘treacherous’ meant.

The whole experience left Mbuya drained and embarrassed. *'Tororo*! Terrorist!' Mbuya had shouted, animatedly, after another boy who lived

across the Mutororiro River had gone. This was before Clever had followed suit. She had prayed hard after that boy left. I'd heard her: Early in the morning, late in the afternoon, late in the evening, praying that her own grandson would not also go. Father Grey had preached strongly against the evils of letting young boys go to Mozambique. Those parents whose children had gone were usually suspended from church -- or if they were regarded important members of the church, they were ordered not to queue for communion for a number of Sundays.

Mbuya, one of the most revered servants of God at the church, was saved from this particular embarrassment. An order from the comrades led to the church soon being closed. Father Grey was forced to leave the country, in a hush.

'He went to Scotland,' Mbuya stated. He'd gone to a place called *Edenbura*. '*Zvavo baba vawe pedyo nedenga. Diko diko vanhu vari Ingirandi kwazi vanoziva Mwari.* Lucky Father, he has moved closer to heaven. Truly, truly, people in England know God.

Chapter 4. The Animal

Misfortune often strikes in duplicity. True to the saying my brother Misfortune died a few days after Clever left to join the freedom fighters in Mozambique. He died just like that, at Marange Clinic.

Misfortune was a few years older than me. Like most siblings born a few years apart, Misfortune and I fought incessantly. We had fights almost as frequent as we looked at each other. He won only a handful of these fights since Sekai did not need a special invitation to join my camp. Sekai was born three years before Misfortune.

I was never fond of Misfortune. He was a coward. He ran when fights broke out at the herding or soccer places. Mbuya commended him for `such thoughtful behaviour'. Still, such 'thoughtful behaviour' deeply embarrassed Clever and I. Clever was ten years older than Misfortune.

Misfortune was a silly boy who entertained people with his silliness. I on the other hand was regarded as too smart for my age and fastidious. Mbuya often chided me for being so moody and arrogant at such a young age. I stood my ground against bigger boys even though I frequently lost in fights. Usually, I started these fights and rarely budged even if trounced miserably. On numerous occasions I won fights when the other boy simply got tired of throwing punches and retreated.

I did not quite understand the meaning of death then, but I did know that Misfortune would never return. Village funerals those days greatly frightened me. Mbuya had warned us never to do silly things when there was a funeral in the village, otherwise it would become a habit. A bad habit. So, everyone obeyed. Death in the village led to a temporary halt in fights and squabbles.

I probably would have had better memories of Misfortune's funeral had I attended the funeral proceedings. But I wasn't there. I was down ill on a bed beside where he had died at Marange Clinic. I

remember what the nurse said when she admitted us. It was *taifodi*. One of our stepbrothers Pardon had also been admitted with the ailment. A mere three days after our admission, Misfortune had died.

On the day that Misfortune died, I woke up early in the morning, calling out his name. No answer came. Later that morning Mbuya had not appeared to check on us as she always did. I cried. I did not want to stay in the clinic alone and I wondered where they had taken Misfortune.

The nurse came to '*take my temperature.*' She said I was much better than before. Still, she forced me to drink the smelly, sticky, sweet liquid – the one which smelt of hospital, illness and death. It nauseated me and for long reminded me of death every time I smelt it. The nurse said Mbuya had gone back to the village. She said Sekai would come to take care of me and my stepbrother, Pardon. She did not say why Mbuya had left so suddenly.

Sekai came later that day. The clinic was just over ten kilometres from our village. Everyday there was a single bus that passed through the clinic from our village en route to Umtali. Sekai came on it. Being only a young girl herself, she had cried all the way to the clinic. Sekai did not say anything about Misfortune's death. I suspect Mbuya had advised her not to say anything.

The next day Mbuya came. Tears flowed freely down her aging eyes. That's when I realised something was wrong. It was not often that I saw Mbuya with real tears in her eyes. I had often seen her wail and mourn when this or that other relative had died but this was rarely accompanied with real tears.

'Your brother Misfortune is gone. Gone to rest. We will never see him again in this world,' Mbuya said, and began to sob. I did not say anything, just looked more frail and ill. Mbuya looked at me and sobbed even more, probably fearing the worst, which was that I too would die.

A few more days in the clinic, and I was discharged. The first morning I was home, Mbuya took me to the old anthill where Misfortune had been buried and asked me to place a couple of pebbles on the grave. She said a small prayer and remarked that if we were righteous enough we would meet Misfortune again one day, in heaven, but if we did not try hard enough we would burn in hell like light firewood on a big fire and would never meet those whom we loved. For the next few days I stayed awake each time Mbuya said her prayers to say my own prayers. Who in their right mind would want to burn like a bundle of light firewood?

If only I been older then, I would have made sense of the witch-hunt that followed Misfortune's death. Much was said about those suspected of having killed him. In our community no one ever died of natural causes. Always, there was a *muroyi* (witch*)* involved in a death. Even when one died at over a hundred years of age, or if one fell from a tree, or drowned in a river because they couldn't swim, the community would still attribute the death

to a *muroyi*. A muroyi was a normal person who, during the day, lived a normal life in the village like everyone else but turned into a feared, invisible witch at night, capable of entering other people's houses without opening doors and reputed to travel long distances without any form of transportation.

The powers which a muroyi are said to possess would make a mockery of modern day science. Apart from sneaking into people's houses at night through solid walls, nakedly, invisibly, they could domesticate unimaginable animals for their own luxurious use and powers, in order to torment other people. Riding on hyenas and owls is their preferred mode of transport, and a snake or a black cat is their preferred messenger of death.

When Misfortune died, half a dozen names from the village were mentioned as the likely killers. People we knew, people most of us were related to. Sekai said the spirit that led to Misfortune's death came in the form of an animal. She said Misfortune had seen the animal near the small rivulet called Mutororiro, which dissected our village.

Indeed Misfortune had seen a strange animal and had told me about it. 'The whole body of the animal seemed to be painted in blood,' he had intoned. 'Like a live, skinned animal.'

'Maybe it's just its colour, not blood,' I'd suggested to Misfortune, who had rebuked me, accusing me of acting smart even concerning the things which I hadn't seen.

The animal had stood there staring at him while he tried to scare it away. When he threw a few pebbles and the animal didn't budge, he loaded his catapult and aimed at the animal. He tugged hard on the weapon but both strands broke at the same time, as if incised by a sharp scissors. It was then that Misfortune had become frightened. He ran to call Pardon, who was near by, to go and see the strange animal. By the time Misfortune went back with Pardon, the animal had vanished. There were no drops of blood where the animal would have stood, not even footprints, but Misfortune had insisted

he'd seen blood dripping off the strange animal, like drops of rain from tree leaves after a heavy storm.

When Misfortune told Mbuya about the sighting, Mbuya was visibly shaken. I thought how exciting it was to see such a weird animal so close to home. I had wanted badly to see this animal, myself. Even if the animal were not there anymore just seeing the place where it stood and bled would have been so exciting -- A skinned, live animal, oozing blood like drops of dew. Later that day, I nagged Misfortune about going back where he had seen the animal. He'd refused until it had become a verbal brawl, when he gave in. We had gone. I had then discovered that the animal had left no sign of its presence. All that I saw was Misfortune' broken catapult.

That afternoon, Misfortune had complained of a severe headache. Pardon had followed; and then me. It was an intense, nerve-splitting headache. None of us complained of any other symptoms, no fever, no stomach-ache, no malaise, just a headache. The very

next day we were all admitted at Marange Clinic, diagnosed with typhoid.

This series of events led to a wide-ranging belief that this animal had been the cause of all the illnesses and death. Consensus among relatives was that a witch doctor or a prophet of religion should expose the person responsible. Mbuya, an ardent Christian, was quick to reject the idea.

'We will all die one day, so if it was God's will that this child should die then who are we to try to stop it,' Mbuya said.

She dismissed the idea of going to witch doctors as ungodly and satanic. Her persistent refusal to consult witch doctors led to the idea of getting help from them being dropped. Privately, though, the names of suspected killers did the rounds in the village and some relatives continued to bay for blood.

Against Mbuya, Sekai had repeatedly told anyone who would listen to her story of the animal

as well as the names of those suspected of having sent the animal. 'The animal was really a hyena which rained the blood out of an unsuspecting Misfortune.' Sekai had stated.

Chapter 5: God's Own Poverty

Before Clever left for Mozambique, he and Misfortune ploughed the fields using an oxen pulled plough. They did the ploughing for the entire extended family. Only after they had completed ploughing the fields of the important people in the family would they come to do our own, sandy, barren, exhausted, and non-fertile patch of land. Clever worked tirelessly to bring the plough to our own fields before the season was too advanced for planting.

Mbuya, being an unmarried woman, did not own land. A charitable distant relative had leased to her the sandy, overused patch that we called our fields. Year after year we barely harvested anything from the fields, let alone enough grain to last us for another year. Year after year, Mbuya would make up for the food deficit by working in other people fields for food.

'This burden of poverty would be difficult for even God himself to alleviate. Only God himself can explain why human beings should be so poor.'

I remember overhearing one of our relative from Salisbury whisper to her son when she had come to visit uncle and decided to pass by and greet Mbuya. She had brought her two children with her. I had admired everything about the children; the shoes they wore, their clothes, their skin, which was smooth and shiny, and their knowledge about everything in town and their ignorance about everything in the village.

The older child, a boy a few years older than me had thought I was very smart for a village boy. He asked me questions ranging from the Prime Minister -- 'Ian Douglas Smith,' I said -- to asking me to recite some spellings such as 'something,' which I got wrong. Yet he was not sure of the spelling himself, and on consulting his mother, who was a primary school teacher in Salisbury, it was established that my attempt was better than his.

I had argued with her that English words were too difficult to spell and that often the spellings did not make sense. My sister Sekai agreed with me. She said English spellings were too complicated. She gave an example of two words I didn't know 'source' and 'sauce', which she pronounced the same. If one has never seen the word one can never spell it correctly, she had complained.

Our Salisbury relative said there were ways to remember English spellings. She taught us a short danceable song out of the world 'hi-ppo-po-ta-mus' and said remembering the song ensured one could always spell the word correctly. It worked. I have never had problems spelling the word. Sekai said Shona was the easiest language on earth to spell. She gave the example of two words; *chigaramapfihwa;* second wife; and *chinzvengamutsvaro;* pussy-whipped, and said anyone who could read and write could easily deduce the spellings from their sounds.

Before they left for Salisbury, the boy donated to me his pair of black trainers known as

Tenderfoot. The little black shoes had the words 'Bata', written all over them. I thought it funny that shoes should be labelled '*bata*' which means 'touch' in Shona. Each time I looked at the shoes I would bent down and touch them.

These were my first ever pair of shoes and I treasured them like the last drop of water in a desert. I wished school had not been shut so that I could wear my shoes to school, like the children whose fathers worked in Umtali and Salisbury. Before schools were closed, I had always envied those kids who had worn shoes.

One day, after Mbuya asked me to wear my shoes for a whole day for fear of my feet outgrowing them, I felt that shoes were heavy and uncomfortable. I ceased to admire shoes and wished the boy had given me something else instead.

I was too young to go and work in other people's fields with Mbuya but my sister, Sekai, did so all

the time. My brothers were busy looking after the animals so they were exempted from working in other people's fields. Before Charity, my eldest sister, had left for Salisbury, she had even had her own little paid jobs without Mbuya.

I still harbour fond memories of my sister Charity. Apart from Mbuya, Charity was like a second mother to me. Charity was a calm, reserved, thoughtful young girl of no more than thirteen. Mentally, she had toughed it out rather early for her age and acted like a young adult. Perhaps relentless, pummelling poverty catalysed the early maturity, like hardened child soldiers in war hungry parts of Africa.

Charity loved me as if I held a special position in the family structure, almost as if I were a talisman, a charm that would bring about a turn in the family's fortunes. Charity used to carry me on her back all the time like a loving African mother would do. She would grab me by my thin undernourished little arms and fling me onto her back, leaving me to cling on like a baby baboon

while she just carried on with her normal chores, just like a fully grown woman.

She would ignore my nagging and rarely punished me when my behaviour warranted it. I recall an incident when I had pelted her with stones after she had taken me to Marange Clinic when I had got stung by either a scorpion, or a centipede. On the way to the clinic I had told her that under no circumstances was I to receive an injection. She had promised that I wouldn't. As we walked out of the clinic after I had had an injection I went berserk, like a rabid dog. I charged at her demanding to know why this had happened. I had thrown stones at her with all the mighty my thinly arms could exert. Charity had run away from this rage, and later calmed me down with a bun and a warm *freezit* -- a little transparent-plastic packaged drink, made from water and sugar and mildly coloured and flavoured.

I was not at all surprised Charity could afford to buy me a *freezit*. She was meticulous with resources. She had already learnt from Mbuya how to save and how to survive with a bare minimum.

Before we left home Mbuya had apologised to her for not having any money for the bus fare. We had had no choice but to walk the ten kilometre journey. For once I had heard my grandmother lamenting her own God's given poverty as an unwanted present from the one whom she revered above. On most occasions she just bottled her feelings and accepted the gift, like the biblical Job.

Unlike Charity, Sekai reflected little of Mbuya's teachings in her personality. Sekai loved me unreservedly but took no nonsense from me or from anyone for that matter. Slaps were the order of the day even though she held no grudges and would be quick to come and apologize to her little brother even when he might be the one in the wrong. Had the stone pelting incident at Marange Clinic been with Sekai, it would surely have developed into a stone pelting battle between older sister and little brother. And if she were to have lost the battle, she might have easily left me behind.

Sekai often took it upon herself to 'educate me' about the principles of life, even though such

teachings conflicted with Mbuya's biblical teachings which Sekai had begun to ridicule at a very young age. Often the family labelled her a rebel, a problematic child, and rewarded her with the bulk of the children's floggings. Sekai would never hesitate to say her piece of mind especially about the male chauvinist social structure in the family, which earned her further beatings, which it seemed, she couldn't care less about. She was very outspoken and would not hesitate to point a finger at anything she perceived as contributing to the poverty and suffering in our family. She rebelled vehemently for a society that had no place for *vazukuru*, fatherless maternal grandchildren. Children who did not belong, children with no totem like whites. Children who had no surname and could only use one that had no connection to their paternal blood.

After Misfortune died, and Clever left for Mozambique Sekai and I bonded. I soon began to understand who she was and loved her. Her affection for her little brother grew as we both grew older and her perceived favouritism from Mbuya

towards me as a contributing factor to her woes dwindled. She began to see me as someone special who did not receive praise for what I did but because of who I was.

After Clever left to join the freedom fighters in Mozambique and after Misfortune's death, my uncle, was left with no one to look after the animals and to plough the fields. He hired a local village boy, Norman, to do these chores. After their ploughing was finished, uncle came to Mbuya and told her that she could use the oxen to do her own cultivation, but regretfully, Norman would not be available to help us.

By that time most people had long finished planting and were already in advanced stages of weeding. It also happened that at that time Mbuya was down with a severe case of sandworm infestation which had left her in severe pain. Her entire foot had tiny holes that crisscrossed each other like worm burrows in over-watered soil. The rural clinic had been shut due to the war, and there were no more buses or cars plying the area due to

the landmines which had been planted there by the freedom fighters during the war of liberation. Mbuya thus had to sit at home and endure the pain. She was in so much pain. One evening lit by billions of unperturbed stars, Sekai convinced me that between us we could do some ploughing.

Early in the morning after, she woke me up. We had to go to the fields and plough.

'Come on Boy, let us get the oxen yoked and we'll get things started,' she said with conviction, trying to demonstrate responsibility.

I rose reluctantly from my reed mat bed and sauntered lazily behind Sekai to the cattle kraal. The early morning cold dew dampened my cracked feet, giving the effect of soaking biltong. My feet felt numb and itchy but I kept treading on. I skirted a few thorns in the semi-darkness, but due to my half stupor, a few thorns found their ways into my feet. I stooped, plucking the thorns with exaggerated effort as if I was plucking out giant nails, which had

pierced their way into my feet. A few metres in front, my sister did the same, only with less drama.

Oblivious to us merry doves cooed their melodious morning tunes in the tall Amarula trees that surrounded our homestead. Cocks crowed incessantly as if competing for a prize which came from out-crowing the others. Voices of grown men could be heard all around us driving their oxen before the sun rose. Soon it would be too hot for both animals and humans.

The two oxen looked on with disdain as the contingent of three approached the kraal. I walked behind Sekai and she walked behind Norman, who had consented to harness the animals for us.

'Only this once,' he had conceded.

With amazing dexterity he clutched strings, whips and strobes in one hand whilst in the other hand he propped up his dropping trousers, which had lost their elastic banding around the waistline.

This extra chore did not seem to perturb him. After harnessing the oxen Norman left us alone.

We drove the oxen down the path that meandered round the conical hill that separated our village from the closed school. We each took turns holding on to control of the plough. We could not afford to let the plough to be dragged along without control. Were it to hit a tree or a rock, it could be damaged and that would spell deep trouble for us, resulting in it never being lent to us again. The plough was almost too heavy for either of us but we each managed to do the job. Since there were only two of us, there was no one to lead the oxen from the front. One of us held on to the plough while the other drove the oxen. Grown ups usually had no problem holding the plough and driving the animals at the same time, but for us it was different. Luckily for us, the oxen clambered obediently for the whole distance to our fields without incident. They even seemed to know exactly where they were going and what was required of them.

Once there, the oxen sauntered lackadaisically, going through their paces. We tried using sticks and whips to drive them faster but we couldn’t drive them by this method. They simply picked the pace they wanted to go at by themselves. They often came to a complete halt whenever it suited them. After about two hours of great effort, we found that we had done only a few rounds. Every second round, I had to wait in one corner of the field with the oxen, so that Sekai could drop millet seeds along the previous line.

Eventually, the two oxen came to a complete halt – both at once, as if they’d planned it.

'Hey, move, move, bad ox!' I used the language Clever had used to drive them, but they wouldn't budge. After trying without success for some time, I became furious. I only wished that I were older. Not because if I were older the two oxen would obey me, but because then I would crack some sense into their big for nothing, spiteful, beastly heads. I took it so personally that I promised hell to one of the oxen, which would be meted when I had grown up.

'*Bhuru, Bhuru, iwe Bhuru, uchaona,* Bhuru, you will see'

We were left with no choice but to unyoke them and go back home. Neither Sekai nor I had the courage to touch the animals. We were both aware that the ox named Bhuru had a terrible temper, particularly when tired. Once he had chased Misfortune into a tree, according to Misfortune himself. Clever had said that he doubted whether this was true.

Bhuru seemed to be drooling with bad temper. His black and white spotted face looked furious and wild. If he did not have horns one would be forgiven for mistaking him for a leopard. His eyes shot a menacing look at us as if planning to go to war with the entire human race.

'When yoking and unyoking oxen, each animal is trained when to come to the yoke. One animal is trained to come in first and the other to come in second,' Clever had explained to Misfortune once, while I listened. 'Rarely are animals trained to do

both. Unyoking the wrong animal first could make the other animal panic. The animal could injure itself or someone could get hurt'.

After what seemed like more time than we had actually spent ploughing, Sekai and I had failed to unyoke Bhuru, the animal we had to unyoke first. Unwittingly I had gone to the softer ox and released him from the yoke. Bhuru's temper flared. He leapt high into the air and charged at me, his eyes full of rage and fright. I ran, with my heart in my mouth. Bhuru bellowed angrily and menacingly at me as if demanding restitution. I kept running and only stopped when Bhuru stopped bellowing. I only thought of Sekai once I stopped running.

I did not see her.

'Sekai,' I called out.

'I am here,' she answered back, perched on a small hill on the edge of the field. The ox was still tied to the yoke and the twisted strobes which were now very tight from its struggling seemed to render

its breathing difficult. There was now the danger that it could strangle itself to death. Still, I could not contemplate moving any closer.

'Hello' a child's voice called from the road, 'Anybody there?'

'Yes, we are here,' I called back, now that I was safely perched on the same hill with my sister.

'What are you doing up there?' It was Shingai, a daughter of a distant uncle who lived close to our fields.

'Bhuru wants to attack us,' Sekai said, 'He has been chasing us.'

'What? He is only an ox, not a lion.'

'He is worse than a lion, an ox which attacks people,' Sekai exclaimed.

'So what are you going to do? Leave it there?'

We hadn't thought about that. All that we had thought about had been our safety.

'Can you please help us to unyoke him?' Sekai begged.

I was embarrassed that she had asked. Shingai was hardly as old as Sekai herself was. Both Sekai and I knew she was renowned for her bravery and ability to handle practical jobs.

'She is a man, this one,' her father often bragged about Shingai. 'Not only is she better than boys her age but she is even better than a lot of mature men.'

'That little girl has balls,' Clever had once said of her one day when he saw her milking cows alone in their backyard. I had found it very funny and had repeated it to Mbuya who had screamed at me in response. Stern words were probably also uttered to Clever in my absence, for having said to me such ungodly things.

Shingai started to move towards Bhuru. Bhuru sized her up, sniffing and making as if to charge. Throughout all of this, Shingai didn't move an inch. Bhuru bellowed menacingly and looked at her. She stopped advancing but didn't retreat. The ox bellowed again and Shingai intoned firmly, 'Bhuru!'

The ox stood still. Shingai moved closer. The aggression in Bhuru's eyes suddenly appeared to have been smothered.

Shingai grabbed Bhuru by one of his horns with her small hands, held the strobe up and with a few strong tugs, gently pulled it off. Bhuru jumped out of the yoke to follow the other ox grazing nearby. Sekai and I just looked at each other. Neither of us even said thank you to Shingai as she continued on her journey.

'She just wanted to show off,' I said to Sekai, ‘If only I hadn’t been in hospital lately I would have been able to manage what she did.'

'Did you look at her hands? They are as rough as those of a baboon,' my sister rejoined.

'I know what gives her so much courage and strength.' I said to my sister, walking away.

'What?' queried Sekai.

'She has got balls,' I uttered, laughing out aloud.

Chapter 6. The Muppet Show

We did not have a radio. No one in the village had one that worked. Although the Muzanemhamo family had one, it only functioned at Christmas -- after one of their sons had brought a battery from Salisbury. Still, the news filtered through, and rather rapidly at that, for a community that had solely relied on word of mouth. I first heard it from Mbuya.

'The war is over,' she said.

'Really. What does that mean? Does it mean that Clever will come back?'

'If he is alive,' Sekai said, never being one to sieve her words.

'Don't talk like that,' Mbuya said, 'Of course he is alive! God looks after those who believe.'

Now there were celebrations throughout the country because the war had been won. Fought in the bush and won at a table. Won at a table in London, mother said. It did not make sense to me, a war being won at a table, but that's exactly what mother said.

'Lancaster House,' mother said, was what the table in London was called.

'The country now belongs to us, black people, and it would be called Zimbabwe,' Sekai proclaimed excitedly, 'Zimbabwe means houses of stones,' she emphasised, as if none of us could understand any Shona.

Sekai said that now we could expect that things would change. We would be able to go to school again. Our lives would be better. The big cities, whose names would also change, would belong to black people and the majority of people would go to live in Salisbury, which would be called Harare. Most of the people from our village would be going to Umtali, which would be named Mutare.

'Ugly names,' I felt.

The white people who had lost the war would work for black people. They would water our gardens, cook for us and even polish black people's shoes.

I laughed at all this as I just couldn't see that happening. A person, white as Father Grey, running around with a bucket, watering vegetables for black people. Sekai must still have been intoxicated by the evening rallies with the freedom fighters, which had taken place before the ceasefire. I had been too young to go, but whatever it was that was said seemed to make people in the village very happy. Happy to be who they were, happy to be black and poor, as if poverty was a virtue that warranted pride.

As soon as the news of the war being over started filtering through the village, Sekai and her friends went round the village preaching the good news.

'We are depoliticising people, that's what we are doing', she said after Mbuya asked her to stop running around like a hyperactive dog.

'Polik what?' I could not pronounce the word.

She just laughed.

Mbuya said that no such word existed.

I had laughed, pointing fingers at her for making up English words.

It was going back to school and the return of Clever which got me really excited; not the end of the war. It was not long before Clever returned. I could hardly recognise him. He looked alien and important with a little goatee growing on his once smooth face. Mbuya wept and prayed noisily with joy, while mother and other women danced and ululated. They were performing a familiar dance which was performed only during celebrations; a deep transient collapse of the knees, breasts flapping up as if they were wings of a frightened

bird; a projection of the hips sideways, up and down and then a series of two footed hops in a forward direction. Soon, all sorts of hips were swerving and vibrating in unison, as the village women, not waiting for invitations, came in droves to join Mbuya in her celebrations. Each woman would say the customary, '*makorokoto, makorokoto vanhu woye,* congratulations', before breaking into a deafening shrieking ululation, and moving a few calculated steps towards the other dancing women to dexterously join in the hip swerving motions. Some of the more lurid *varooras,* newly married women, moved their hips in circular motions making provocative pseudo erotic innuendos towards the new arrival.

Every now and then, the women would break into a song, a hybrid of village celebratory songs and Christian chorals, most of them vividly permeated by the rhetoric of the recently-ended war. Mbuya only joined in the singing when the song was an uncontaminated Christian song. Often, she would start it herself. The other women, unperturbed by the reverence Mbuya coined to her

songs, would join in with an addition of vigour and enthusiasm in order to make the song danceable.

Clever sat importantly on a bench which Mbuya had borrowed from one of the neighbours for the occasion. He was neatly dressed, in a short-sleeved khaki shirt and blues jeans trousers. He actually looked really important. It was hardly the look I expected from a fighter just returning from a long stint in the bush. Sekai said the government had given the fighters money; enough to get them home and buy them a few possessions.

'It's called *demobo*. The money is called *demobo*,' she said.

'It's called demobilisation, not *demobo*,' mother corrected her.

Clever stayed in the village for only a few weeks before he left for the city to live with Mkoma. Soon after that, schools were reopened and off I went. Everything I had learned before the war had started

appeared to have evaporated like a volatile liquid on a hot dry day.

I argued with Mbuya that all my friends in the village were going back several grades from where they had left -- but still she refused to let me redo grade one. Instead, she made me jump a grade into grade 3 so that I wouldn't be a year behind for my age. A teacher who used to be Mbuya's church friend had given her this advice. I reluctantly went into grade three, whereupon I found that my classmates were anything from fifteen to twenty years of age. I was one of only two students under the age of ten in that class. The other was a little girl called Eve, with whom I soon made friends.

Grade 3 was tough. Apart from the learning materials being difficult, almost everyone, including the girls bullied me. Physically, I could not stand up to anyone in class except Eve, who faced the same bullying problems. Often, the two of us would huddle in a corner of the classroom like cold little chicks, crying. I found school not as enjoyable as I had anticipated. I came 42nd out of 46 in the first

term of grade 3. Mbuya said she regretted having asked me go into grade 3. She said if my performance did not improve by the end of that year, she would let me repeat Grade 3.

Clever was also far from being happy with my school performance. He had expected much more from me. Since both Mkoma and he were working and earning 'reasonable' salaries, they made sure I was well dressed and looked smart in school. In fact, I was the best-dressed child in the entire school, one teacher had remarked.

Though I struggled with school, I was nonetheless the teacher's favourite. Towards the end of that third term things had begun to make sense. I could make sense of an abacus and could distinguish between tens and units. Still I fell well short of the top brass in class -- those whom I envied dearly.

It was during the second term of grade five when the unexpected happened. I came first. It surprised everyone: The family, the school, even the

headmaster. I thought I had fluked it. I was afraid that, come the following term, reality would strike. It didn't happen. In the third term, I came first again. My brothers were elated with my performance and Clever rewarded me by inviting me to spend one of the following school holidays with both of them in Harare.

I went with Mbuya. I remember the trip well. It was an exhausting journey in a Chingaira bus that took over twelve hours to travel the three hundred or so kilometres to Harare. It was on that trip that I saw a television for the first time. It had made me laugh. It was an old black and white television set, kept in a corner of the room at my aunt's house in Waterfalls, a then plush suburb of Harare.

'TV,' Mbuya announced on the bus, to prepare me for the shock. 'It shows pictures of white children from countries far away.'

I did not ask much about a TV then but I couldn't wait. When my aunt turned it on, I had just laughed. Weird, little, strange-looking creatures

spoke to each other in funny languages. They were neither people nor white kids, as Mbuya had said. They were not even animals. Instead, they were weird, strange creatures, alive and talking. They looked just like a creation of art, but still they were live, singing, dancing and talking.

"Muppet Show," my aunt explained, "the program is called 'The Muppet Show' and those creatures are called cartoons."

'*Macartoon*?' I looked for confirmation, *shonalising* the word.

'Yes, *macartoons*,' aunt said.

'Are they alive?'

Aunt laughed. Mbuya didn't. She just looked askance at me, as if pleading with me not to embarrass her.

'No, they are not; they just look like they are. Children love them.' Aunt said.

'How do they make them talk?'

'They use tricks. White people know how to use tricks.'

'And how do they put them inside that box?' I asked pointing at the television set.

'They are not inside there. They are in some other place, just like people who talk in a radio. The people who talk in a radio are not inside the radio, are they?'

I understood. It was so fascinating. It felt great to live in the city.

The houses in the city were also amazing. My aunt lived in a genteel Harare suburb, Waterfalls. Everyone in Waterfalls spoke English. Kids too, everyone. It made me feel uncomfortable.

'Your cousins do not understand Shona,' Mbuya explained. So, I'd attempted to string together a few English sentences, which only generated great

laughter from kids and adults alike. After that, I stopped trying. I spoke only to Mbuya or aunt if I had to say anything.

During this time, I also looked forward to the day when Clever would come and take me with him to Highfields. Highfields was a Harare high-density suburb where, according to Mkoma and Clever, 'things happened'. My brothers arranged to come and visit Mbuya frequently in Waterfalls and take me to go and stay with them in Highfields. Early on a Saturday morning Clever came and we were off to Highfields.

Chapter 7. Killer Ants

Highfields was a suburb that buzzed with activity. My brothers lived in the northern part of the suburb, Old Highfields, a stone's throw from Gwanzura Stadium and the famous Machipisa Beer Garden. Machipisa Beerhall was a second home to my brothers. They drank there, they ate there, and once every so often they even slept there. According to Mkoma, Machipisa was a 'heaven'. 'Heaven for those who were called and answered,' Mkoma would say. Answering to the call of a happy life and joy.

My brothers' home was a little square cabin in someone's backyard. The cabin was made of untreated eucalyptus timber as if it was some advanced form of cow pen. A dozen or so similar structures stood unordered in clusters around the compound and beyond, as if they were anthills in unperturbed grasslands. All over Highfields these structures overflowed with *maroja*, a crude Shona translation for lodgers. The more prosperous

marojas lived in flat-garbed one-roomed structures attached to the main house.

'When you come next time Boy, Clever and I will be living in one of those.' Mkoma said, pointing to one of the flat-garbed structures in front of their shack. Clever nodded in agreement.

The compound where my brothers lived was more than overcrowded. The toiletry, the water, and the rubbish disposal system were stretched to the limit. The toilets produced a stench that would make trivial the smell of a decaying carcass. The water cistern system rarely worked and on the few occasions that it did work it made such a loud creaking and cringing sound that unfailingly sent the nosy pigeons, incessantly on the scrounge for food, scrambling for dear life.

The WC rarely managed to flush the human waste, which accumulated inside the rusty, corrugated iron chamber like a parcel waiting to be appropriately wrapped and dispatched. On the few occasions that the WC system did work, water

paddled onto the mound of drying, stale, and decaying faeces, which mingled with low-quality used newspapers used as toilet paper. It was when nature called that I most missed home. I just couldn't stand going into that filthy, disgusting, dehumanising bathroom.

In the village, one would always choose a clean unused spot behind the bushes. And as long as one was willing to walk the extra distance, the danger of walking onto a used spot was minimal. Still, to me the toiletry system in Highfields was much better than what I had seen in Waterfalls, a toilet inside the house. How could people have a toilet in the house? At was as if human beings were the same as cows and goats, defecating right there where they lived and slept.

While I was in Highfields, I quickly learnt that village boys were ridiculed, scorned and laughed at by their city counterparts, so to the boys in Harare I said that I was from the eastern border city of Mutare, not from the village. They still laughed.

'Oh there, where there is only one robot in the whole town,' one boy said, and the whole group laughed. If only they knew that this very trip to Harare had been my very first encounter with a 'robot'. I still have not figured out why Zimbabweans call traffic lights 'robots'. I only realised several years later that in Britain a 'robot' did not refer to a traffic light. That was when I was in Scotland. Someone had stopped to ask me for directions. I had instructed him to turn right at the robots. He had looked at me with unmistaken amusement.

'There are robots on the road?' he had responded, with a strange look.

His question surprised me. What did he mean by asking if there were robots on the road?

'Is there someone manning the robots?' he'd asked.

'Why, the robots are working just fine,' I said to him.

He then looked more amazed than amused. 'What exactly are the robots doing on the road?' he’d persisted.

I had thought of him as ridiculous and walked away. It was much later that I realised that robots were only on Zimbabwean and not on British roads. On British roads they had traffic lights.

During the day on weekdays, I usually hung around with the Highfields boys until my brothers were back from work. As soon as my brothers were back from work we were all off, to the beerhalls. Children were not allowed into the beerhalls in Harare, but I was my brothers' boy. My brothers were well known in the drinking arenas in Harare, so who wouldn't break a few rules for their sake.

'This is my young brother from roots (village), Joseph, Joseph Wiseman.' Mkoma had said to his

friends on the first day I went to Machipisa with them.

On that first day, I was surprised to see so many women in the beerhall. In the village, drinking was only for men and only a handful of very old women drank. Immediately after we had sat down, a fair complexioned, big, well-built woman with a beautiful smile came and sat with us.

'And who is this cute one?' she asked Mkoma, stroking my kinky, wiry short hair.

'Little bro,' Mkoma said, 'from roots.'

'He is so cute, doesn't look like he is a boy from *kumusha,* the village,' she said, still stroking my hair and exaggerating her lurid smile.

'And smart too. He is very smart. We call him Joseph, Joseph Wiseman. Hey JW, meet Rose.' Mkoma looked at me, then at Rose, as if showing off a newly purchased possession to a family member, to be admired.

I looked up at Rose but didn't say anything.

'*Ko* beer?' Rose asked

'What are you drinking today?' Mkoma asked with unquestionable pride from the envy he perceived as coming from fellow revellers.

'The usual'

'One Castle Larger please,' Mkoma shouted to an inattentive elderly waiter loafing about.

'A number of other women came to try and squeeze a beer or two from Mkoma, which was often not too difficult. For the night though, Rose had the prized possession. Rose sat right by Mkoma's knee and became tenaciously tactile once alcohol began tampering with her higher centres.

More women came into the beerhall as the night crept by, most of them clad in skirts that would have instantly sent my grandmother down onto her knees in prayer. Such improper dressing, according to Mbuya, would defile anyone who dared look, more than the perpetrator. The short skirts were made to look even shorter by the huge buttocks that looked

like babies tied too low on the back with extendable fabrics. From the frequency of gazes, saliva swallowing, and bulges to certain parts of anatomy, most revellers seemed to adore this rear phenomenon.

Once, when a couple of huge ladies, large at the front and extra large at the rear, stood up to dance to Leonard Dembo's Venezia, all of the men stopped drinking and stared, hypnotised and fantasizing about what could be. As the two women started gyrating and vibrating their huge extra large rears in unison with their thick waistlines with everything moving with disproportionate flexibility, the patrons went into a state of frenzy. When the turntable stopped spinning my ears almost went deaf, as every single voice screamed *engo,* urging the disc jockey to replay the song.

For the rest of my stay in Highfields these series of events were repeated. My brothers would come back from work and we would all go to Machipisa. On occasions we would go to other beerhalls in the area. Only when the beerhalls were closed would it

be time to go home. Each of my brothers would stagger home, clutching a woman as if she were a rare expensive possession. On each and every one of these occasions, I would stroll behind my brothers and their possessions, proud of them and their accomplishments in life. I often wondered what it was that drew all these women, attractive, good-looking women, so many of them, to my brothers, especially to Mkoma.

Clever said that on a few occasions women had had a physical go at each other for Mkoma. 'This man is more precious that gold,' Clever had offered.

'It's because I am good at the thing. That's why they can't leave me alone.' Mkoma had bragged.

'Rubbish, it's because you pay. Everything that you earn, goes to women,' a friend had shot back.

At the time, Mkoma ignored the comment and stated that if I were to stay longer in the city I would see it for myself, women fighting for him. It never occurred to me then that these women could have

been fighting for a livelihood, not for Mkoma. They lived in a jungle where only the fittest would survive. Even now, as I narrate this story I am not sure who was the predator and who was the prey, the hunter or the hunted, my brother or his female companions.

I lost count of the number of women who slept in Mkoma's bed just over the short period of time that I was in town. All sorts of women came; fat, thin, ugly, beautiful, dark in complexion, as well as the fair complexioned ones who Mkoma liked to call British. Mkoma appeared to prefer these 'British' women, and appeared to prefer them large, strong and muscular. I still remember the names of Mkoma's favourites. Rose. Precious. Prudence. Pretty. Loveness. Patience.

One Saturday morning after Mkoma had just jumped out of a cold shower in the filthy bathroom, I heard him say to Clever casually. 'I got stung'.

'By what?' I asked as if the question had been directed at me.

My brothers looked at each other and laughed.

'By what?' I repeated, confused by the laughter.

'By ants,' answered Mkoma.

Again my brothers laughed. They laughed even more when they realised how confused I was.

'Do you know who it is? Clever asked, more seriously.

'I am pretty sure it's that skinny mosquito from Mufakosi.'

'You should never have trusted her', I don't trust women from Mufakosi.

'It's no big deal, said Mkoma scratching his groin. These things come and go, but I don't want to see that skeleton of a woman again.'

'You should go to the doctor,' Clever suggested.

'Too expensive, waste of buck'

'You could forgo Machipisa this weekend and sacrifice the money to get treatment.'

'Forget it Clever. There is one guy at work who has *muti,* traditional medicine*s,* for everything. He charges very little.

Later I understood that being stung was a euphemism used for getting sexually transmitted infections. Clever explained how sexually transmitted infections, commonly known as *siki*, were very common diseases. Even with his limited education he knew most by name. *Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Chlamydia, Trachomonas*, and more. He even said he could distinguish between the symptoms with his eyes closed.

Mkoma preferred to call these infections, blisters. 'If you cut trees with an axe, you get blisters. Blisters are a sign of hard and meticulous work. The harder you work, the more unlikely they are to reappear,' he said grinning at his own philosophy.

Clever also said that there was nothing to *siki*. They were common ailments, just like the common cold. They were itchy and painful but innocuous,

like being stung by the common ant. Since the ladies from Machipisa were innocuous stingers like the common ant Mkoma and his circle of friends named them 'ants'. A whole decade later, when Mkoma's generation was painfully paying for those innocuous stings, I gave these ladies the appellation of 'killer ants'.

Chapter 8. The Disciples

When I went back from the city to the village, I was a new boy, a changed person. I wore new clothes, had a new pair of Walk Tall shoes as well as a new hairstyle - a city hairstyle. I even had a new Shona accent- a civilised Harare one. The city holiday had consolidated my admiration for my brothers. They were my ideal role models, ones to be envied, and the epitome of success. The nice clean clothes they wore, the clear beer they drank, the expensive cigarettes they smoked and above all the elegant women they changed like clothes were, according to them, what made ordinary men into real men.

Before I left Harare, Clever and I had what he called 'man to man talk'.

'Look Boy, yes life in the city is great, but it could be even greater if one has a sound education,' he began. 'All that Mkoma and I want of you is to

do well in school. You can continue up to any level you want so long as you do well. Understand?'

I nodded.

'See, Boy, we did not have the means to go to school, but you do. Mkoma and I will do everything we can to make sure you go to school. In return you simply have to do your part. You have to do your best. Okay?'

'Okay.'

True to my word I worked very hard throughout primary school and when the final examinations results for Grade 7 came, I found that I had passed them with flying colours. Clever came home and said I could go to whichever school I chose provided the fees were not out of his reach. I chose St Augustine's school, a reputable Anglican Mission School not too far from the city of Mutare.

In secondary school I performed exceptionally well and surprised myself by consistently coming top of my class in every subject.

'The best student I have ever taught,' my history teacher once wrote in my school report. 'Rare combination, a love of God and phenomenal ability in school,' commented the school principal who also trebled as the church priest and a Divinity teacher.

It was whilst I was in form two, just under a decade after independence that I began to mature physically, and one Monday afternoon during a biology lesson, my brain surprised me suddenly by the lack of concentration. Constantly my brain strayed away from the biology lesson. The girl who sat opposite me in the laboratory, Mupi, was occupying a big portion of my disobedient brain.

The more I looked at Mupi, the more my biology made me uncomfortable. I caught myself subconsciously but artfully peeping under the desk to try and catch a glimpse of Mupi sitting 'improperly'. In the labs at St. Augustine's, we sat on

tall long legged narrow headed stools, which made 'appropriate' sitting for girls in their short orange skirts rather a challenge.

Apart from the effect imposed by the uncomfortable stools, Mupi's sitting etiquette had never been the most conservative. I don't actually think she bothered to put any effort into it. I'd caught glimpses of her sitting improperly before now and had considered her sitting manners to be disgusting. Now, my wayward brain craved for a show.

On the day in question, however, Mupi seemed to have acquired manners overnight. All peeping avenues appeared closed with her shapely legs knitted tightly together without her usual fidgeting.

In addition, her legs were parallel to the edge of the huge lab table and not underneath it. Amazingly my brain stuck with her, watching her face grimace, her body twitch, her white blouse vibrate as she meticulously took notes from the teacher. I took notes too -- or pretended I was doing so -- but

nothing meaningful got onto my notebook on that day.

After what seemed like an eternity, Mupi turned and thrust her feet under the table, as if to pay me for my patience. She totally failed to take cognisance of the fact that she was wearing an extra short skirt on the day and left me to feed my wayward imagination. A few seconds of peeping, and a few extra seconds of indulging my imagination totally confused the relationship between my social being, my religious being and my biology. I disembarked from my stool and walked out of the lesson. 'Get behind me Satan,' I uttered silently, heading for the dormitories.

Even though I'd had a girl friend ever since Grade7, no one had ever told me about adolescence. Often my girlfriend, Eve, and I simply did not know what to do with each other when we were alone. Eve was my old friend from primary school, and I had started going out with her during my last year in primary school. Eve had found the later years of primary school difficult and had repeated grade six.

She was in grade six when I handed her my folded, neatly written letter asking her to be my girlfriend. She wrote back immediately. One word on a full A4 paper neatly folded and put in a blue envelope.

'OK'.

In boarding school, receiving letters, especially from girlfriends, was something to look forward to. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Eve's letters even though they were consistently badly written and in equally appalling handwriting. I received many other letters from friends, family and relatives and could always tell the origin from the handwriting and the stamp of the location from where the letter was posted. On one occasion I received a letter with a form of handwriting I could not recognise. It was stamped 'Penhalonga' and I knew of no one living in Penhalonga. The letter was written in abysmal English and in a handwriting that looked like an illiterate's celebrated graffiti. The attempt to produce the letter in English made it funny even though the contents were far from being funny. It read:

14 Chinyanjera

Penhalonga

Dere Boy

I am vere hapy to right this later saying how are you. Me I am vere fine. I want to tell you Eve is now wife of me. You are not aloud to see her. You are not aloud to send her laters. I paid all the money for her lobola. She is vere hapy to be wife of me. Her sister is also wife of me. They are now 3 wifes of me. All vere hapy.

Yours

Madzibaba Jona

My heart sank like a piece of rock in a deep lake. My little girl had been given away in marriage. How could her parents be so cruel? Eve had always been worried that she could be given away for marriage sooner rather than later. I tried to empathise with Eve, but didn't know how to. How could one ever know how it felt to be in her situation?

Eve had been a sweet girl. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever known. She had a brown complexion with a soft innocent face that seemed to smile even during the meanest of times. She had an almost symmetrical little head, which only appeared imperfect because of her ears protruding due to a clean-shaven head she always kept. Her sect required that the head was clean shaven all the time. A small compact body punctuated by tiny sprouting little breasts completed an almost perfect little girl.

Eve and I had got on really well. During my last days in primary school we had walked home together after school even though we lived in opposite directions. We would walk slowly, side by side, not arm in arm, like two little pigeons born together and meant for each other for life. On one or two occasions, I had been threatened with thorough beatings by her brothers just for walking with her, but I had paid no heed.

Most of the time, Eve and I talked about nothing important but once in a while we discussed religion. I always brought up discussions on religion, even

though Eve clearly felt uncomfortable with them. I told her I was proud of my Anglican upbringing.

'The Anglican Church was started by the English people,' I quoted Mbuya, 'One day, if God wishes; we would all live like people in England.'

Eve had agreed that living like people in England was good even though I had my doubts she had any clue how people in England lived. Eve belonged to a local church known as the Followers. Since its formation this church had grown very large and had almost become a sect. The church had a large following particularly in Marange where we lived. Their revered prophet and founder had been born there. He is said to have gone to heaven in a chariot of fire, like the biblical Elijah.

'The values of this church,' Father Grey had preached, 'seem to contradict every biblical teaching and defy every aspect of human reasoning.'

This had been repeated again and again by Mbuya even though I doubt she understood what

the word 'defy' meant, because when I asked her what 'defy' meant she had rebuked me for questioning God's wisdom.

The practice for which father Grey attacked The Followers most was polygamy.

'How can one man have seven wives? That is barbaric and utter disregard of biblical teachings,' he had exclaimed in one of his supercharged sermons. The Followers argued that they knew the bible better than any other denomination. To justify their polygamy, they argued that the bible encouraged human beings to be fruitful and multiply and thus through polygamy they were fulfilling the Bible's teachings.

Eve said arranged marriages topped most church agendas. Girls were given away in marriage to church elders and richer members of the congregation, often at unimaginable ages. Eve was hardly a teenager when she was given away to her sister's husband in marriage. Eve herself had come from a very large family. Her father had sixteen wives, a few of whom were barely older than Eve.

Though we used to meet privately with Eve, we never attempted anything naughty. Eve made me promise that I would not attempt anything that we oughtn't.

'But we are boyfriend and girlfriend,' I said, 'why shouldn't we do what we want?'

'They will find out,' she replied

'Who will find out?'

'Church elders.'

'How will they find out?'

'Elders, women elders do a physical examination,' she said with great difficulty. I could tell she was deeply embarrassed by having to talk about this subject. 'They do it every time there is a *Penta,* large church gatherings.

Pentas were large gatherings where members would meet for days on end, sometimes weeks. At Pentas every girl was physically examined by older women to confirm they hadn't fooled around. Those found to have fooled around were considered a disgrace to their families and unfailingly got into deep water. Mothers too, often got into trouble for their ineptitude in looking after their daughters. Fooling around by a girl was often punished by an immediate forced marriage. Often the suitors for such 'low-grade girls' were of low status in the church and in society and would under normal circumstances not afford to marry a 'proper girl'. Such suitors often did not have enough money to pay *lobola,* dowry.

Another issue that Father Grey preached vehemently against The Followers was their refusal to use medication.

'God does not allow the use of medicine that's all,' Eve said after I questioned why she and her fellow Followers had run away from a mobile immunisation clinic that had come to our school.

The mobile clinic had come to immunise children against measles. Most children who belonged to The Followers had either vanished from classes as soon as the van appeared or bolted away once the immunization session had begun. That year, several children in the village died of measles and most of them belonged to The Followers.

Chapter 9. Mr. Bones

Throughout the first four years of secondary school, Clever stuck to his promise. He paid for my school fees, every single term, without fail. The fees were too high for his meagre salary. Often he had to borrow money from friends to supplement my school fees. He even strived to send me pocket money at the end of each and every month. In return I stuck to my own promise. I worked extra hard in school.

Towards the end of my 'O' levels Clever got married. Kids began to come, rather too quickly. Suddenly the money was not enough. Not enough to feed his fast growing family, let alone pay school fees for a brother. In addition, there was a severe drought in the village and Mbuya needed looking after.

While I waited for my 'O' level examinations results I went to live with a cousin in Mutare. It was then that the letter came from Clever, which

explained the situation. He wished I could continue with school and go on to do 'A' levels but he could not afford the fees anymore. Mkoma was even in a worse off situation than he was.

The reality sank in, far and deep, like a nail into soft wood. I realised that everything had merely been a dream, like living in a wonderland of dream. It had been a solid dream that had to shatter into pieces like thin ice on hard rock. It had been just a volatile dream that was disappearing into thin air like Macbeth's witches. All these years I had harboured it and clung on to the hope of being something. Now that the end had arrived I did not know how to deal with it. It felt like someone on the verge of winning an Olympic medal who had suddenly lost due to no fault of his own.

Clever's letter had cut through by heart like a knife through soft butter. I was simply devastated. I saw the whole world crumbling around my shattered hopes. I wanted to continue with my education, do my 'A' levels and then go to university and to fulfil Mbuya's long time ambition for one of

her grandchildren to go to England and acquire British education. Mbuya was still calling England 'paradise' or earthly heaven long after Father Grey had been replaced; replaced by greedy, lecherous young pastors who preyed on village girls' gullibility. How Mbuya longed for the old days of the pious, old missionaries with real passion and fire for God.

'So what is it young man?' my cousin who had seen me crying for a number of days asked. 'Have you made a girl pregnant?'

'No. Nothing like that', I said looking down.

'What is it then?'

'It's just a letter,' I said and started crying again.

'Just a letter?' he pressed, showing concern.

'Yes, a letter from Clever.'

'From Clever?'

'Yes.'

'Is he alright?'

'Yes. He says he can't afford my school fees anymore.'

My cousin put his arm over my shoulder.

'Clever is struggling to make ends meet. You realise he has a big family now,' he remarked.

My teenager brain did not agree with this line of thinking. Clever was my brother. How could he do that to me? Couldn't he borrow the money or something? I only needed to do two more years in school.

'There are always other means,' my cousin said, with no conviction.

Tears flowed freely down my cheeks, like I'd been an orphan who had been told that his

benefactor had died. I tried to think of the future. Pastures that had looked ever so green and rich appeared dry and barren. My life, which had appeared headed for great things looked directionless. I would end up an ordinary village man, with only a few cows and goats to show for all of my ambitions and effort.

I did a lot of thinking and made a resolution. That I would go for 'A' levels no matter what it took.

'I can start working during this holiday and save some money,' I said to my cousin.

Later that week, my cousin spoke to his boss. I was offered a job as a general hand at the bakery where he worked. After being on the job for four weeks, reality dawned on me. I was not going to be able to raise even a quarter of the fees required for one term before school started again.

I decided to go and 'get some ideas' from my sisters. I was hoping someone would suggest

contributions from each of my four elder siblings. It would be only for a couple of years.

'Find yourself a job. You can always further your education later in life,' my eldest sister said indifferently.

Selfish pig. I was very upset and left angrily. 'Can't people see? I want to do this for the whole family, not just for myself.' I got onto the bus to Sekai's. I did a lot more thinking whilst on the bus. I thought of the possible alternatives besides going for 'A' levels. There was teaching; there were technical apprenticeships, clerical work and many other 'O' level jobs, but none of these appealed to me. All I wanted was a university degree.

When the 'O' level results came back from Cambridge in England where the examinations were graded, I found that I had done extremely well. Our school principal said that I was among the top five students in the whole of our province. My heart burnt, my emotions swelled whilst I sat between two huge women on a seat for two on a bus to

Bulawayo. Sekai and her husband lived in Bulawayo.

I could smell the difference between the two women. The one on my right looked rougher and younger and smelt of raw soap, Perfection Soap, or something soapy mingled with body odour. The one on my left looked older and well kept with distinctive red lips and a very vocal perfume that made even the couple sitting in front of us turn and ogle. She reminded me of Mkoma's Rose.

I did not stay long in Bulawayo. The response from my sister was unequivocal. Go find a job. If I was so keen on proceeding with my education, then I would have to do it on my own, with my own resources. I'd left immediately after she said that. Just like I had done with my eldest sister. In rage I went back to the village, beaten but not defeated.

The first thing I did after I arrived back in the village was sit down on an old wooden stool in Mbuya's hut with pen in hand, paper on my lap, despair in the mind and clouds in the eyes. These

were dark clouds that refused to move no matter how hard I tried to get rid of them. Cumulus, Stratus, Nimbo Stratus and the anvil headed Cumulonimbus all seemed to linger in my personal atmosphere and render rational thinking impossible. Tears flowed freely down my dry, zit infested face as the paper that lay on my lap received the barrage of my unspoken emotions. I churned out letter after letter and put them in cheap khaki envelopes from Kingston's Bookshop. Letters to people I knew and letters to people I did not know. The message in all the letters was the same. I was begging for school fees. The fact that I had done very well at 'O' level gave me a glimmer of hope. I had hope that someone out there might actually look at the letter. I had taken down a number of addresses of all sorts of companies in Harare and Mutare from the big yellow telephone directory at my sister's house.

After the letters had drained all of my emotions I finally managed to sit down with Mbuya to explain the situation. She looked neither concerned nor worried, which was not unusual. Her belief in the power of him above solving every problem in life

often times reassured, but on this occasion I felt angry at her God for forsaking me at the moment of my greatest need.

'Mbuya, what shall we do?' I questioned, knowing the answer too well.

She looked at me and smiled, as if her smile was the solution to every problem.

'Mbuya,' I said.

She started a tune.

Ngerutendo rukuru, Vamwe vanopona ndirwo, because of faith, some got rewarded.

Her song suddenly broke into a long, emotional prayer which lasted forever.

Schools reopened and I packed my bags and went to school with other students, as if all was well. I was expecting to be sent away, as happened to every student who went to school with no fees. The principal was very strict on fees and made sure the fees rules were not applied selectively.

One of the letters that had come out of the emotional roller coaster was meant for one of the teachers at our school. It was brief letter, written in a neat, handwriting slanting slightly to the right on an unlined A4 Newsprint paper. The message was brief and to the point. I was seeking assistance with fees for my 'A' levels. It was addressed to Mr. Bones, the Geography teacher. Mr. Bones was a skinny, cheerful British expatriate teacher who spoke with a slow, well-pronounced BBC World Service type of English and said he was from Surrey, wherever that was.

Mr Bones was in his fifties and had been at the school for a long time. He said he loved St. Augustine' Mission School and for him that was home. Mr. Bones had never been married and during his entire tenure at the school he had always lived with a couple of male students whom he assisted with school fees. Such a charitable act was forever being praised by the school principal.

He was a man of many talents and also in charge of the cricket team, a game the majority of the students from the rural areas did not understand. He was in charge of the church choir. He was in charge of the Boys Scouts. He was in charge of the Computing Society. And many more other activities. When he walked, Mr. Bonzo, as he came to be known, walked with an unusual gait, shoulders perpendicular to the ground, buttocks elevated and chest forward as if he had invisible breasts. Like he was a modern version of George Lucas' horse-like aliens in the Star Wars movie epic, the Phantom Menace.

I put my letter in Mr. Bones' pigeonhole as I did not have the confidence to hand it to him in person. Mr. Bones called me into his office soon after reading my letter. He was happy to help me, he said. I was a good student. A student with manners, just like the other students he had chosen to assist with school fees. There was one condition to my getting assistance, he had said. To make sure I utilised my time well to study and to cut down on boarding fees I would have to move in and live in his house, just like the two other students for whom he was paying fees.

At first I hesitated. That's not what I had had in mind. I had not expected to move in and live with Mr. Bones in his house. But he had offered to pay my fees and he wanted me to put in optimum effort into my studies so what was the big deal. I carried my school bags and moved in to live with Mr. Bones.

I was given my own room. There was an extra room apart from the two used by the other students being looked after by Mr. Bones. A few days after I

moved in with Mr. Bones, I had just turned off the reading light and getting ready to sleep when Mr. Bones unexpectedly walked into my room, without knocking, and just stood there, inches away from my bed. He did not seem like he was looking for anything in particular, which made me rather uncomfortable. What could he want in my room at that time of the night? He hardly kept any of his possessions in any of our rooms. I could only make out his silhouette since the night was pitch dark. If he wanted something why wouldn't he simply try to wake me up or put on the lights? He stood motionless without movement.

My sixth sense said he was looking at me, in the dark. After a long while a speck of fear afflicted my nerves. What did the man really want in my room? I thought about asking him what he wanted but decided against it. I thought of coughing, just to alert him that I was awake but again decided against it. I just lay there, motionless but watching him all the same.

After what seemed like a century, he seemed to have summoned some courage and sat at the edge of my bed, careful not to make any noise. He clearly thought I was asleep. I became frightened. If he tried to touch me, I would confront him, but for the moment I lay still.

When my eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, I realised Mr. Bones was stark naked. My heart missed a beat. After sitting on the edge of my bed for a while he stood up. I saw him groping in the darkness for something which he found on a chair at the foot of my bed. He picked up whatever he had found and left the room. After an hour or so, he came back to return whatever it is that he had taken from the room. He did not linger in the room this time.

It was only the next morning when I realised what he had taken from my room. A pair of my underwear. The man had helped himself to my underwear and brought it back, wet. He had tried to use a towel after whatever he had done but the

disguise hadn't worked. I was disgusted and angry. What was wrong with this man?

For the nights that followed I made sure I slept in my clothes and left no underwear lying about. Mr. Bones did not reappear. Still, I asked myself the question of what I would do if he tried to touch me. It was a frightening question. If I reported him to the school authorities then the other two boys and I would be the laughing stock of the whole school. Undoubtedly, we would be labelled Mr. Bones wives.

When I tried to find out from the other two students more about Mr. Bones, the responses I got from them was far from reassuring. Every day, each one of them acted and behaved like they had something to tell me but none of them ever said anything. I felt very uncomfortable. Not only with Mr. Bones now, but with the other two students.

One, night a few weeks after the incident with Mr. Bones I was fast asleep when I felt a hand sneaking into my blankets. I was a very light sleeper

and the slightest of movements anywhere close by would wake me up. In my sleepiness I slipped out of bed ready to run.

Mr. Bones stood up, naked, and unashamed.

'Sir, what are you doing?' I uttered.

'Weren't you told?'

'Told what sir, I do not understand.'

'Listen Boy, there is no need to pretend. I told the boy Ngochi to explain to you what this is all about.'

'Sir, Ngochi never told me anything.' I answered indignantly.

'Well, he should have. But now it does not matter. The fact is I am paying a lot of money for your fees. The least you can do is to be grateful.'

'Sir, I appreciate your help but I am afraid I can't be part of what you want to do.' I tried to remain calm. And somehow I even managed to.

Mr. Bones switched on the lights and stood there, stark naked, just like an alpha gorilla displaying its strength to a weaker member of the group.

I faced him, exuding anger. Raw, undiluted anger.

'Look Boy, when you asked for assistance with fees you should have asked the other boys what this entailed. A smart boy like you cannot also be brainless.' He was very angry. The anger, coupled with the unrelenting rigidity of part of his anatomy frightened me.

I stood there, daring Bonzo to move. He moved a few inches closer, then thought better of it and stopped. Then he moved again, only more slowly.

'Sir, don't move any closer to me than you are now, ' I warned him.

He took heed and backed off.

'Listen, I want you out of my house, right now. Do you understand? And do not expect any further handouts from me, you understand! And you can kiss school goodbye! See if I care.'

That hurt.

'In this day and age, you don't expect just to be fed without giving something back,' he said and walked out of the room.

I started packing the few possessions I had into my metal case.

I left the school before any of the other students were awake. I lifted the case with my possessions, put it on my head and walked downhill, towards the bus stop in Penhalonga.

Mbuya was more than pleased to see me when I arrived home. She was literally jumping with joy. It made no sense. How could she be happy to see me at home when she would know that I would have been sent away due to non-payment of school fees?

'I did not expect the message to have arrived to you already.' She said 'I only sent it the day before yesterday.'

'What message Mbuya,' I asked and looked down. I wanted to say, '*stop talking nonsense you ignorant old woman, do you realise that this is the end of road to my future*.'

'If you did not get the message then why are you home?'

'I got sent away from school because of fees Mbuya.' I said. 'I do not think I will be going back to school.' Tears began to flow freely down my desiccated cheeks.

'Of course you will, she said jovially. That was the message that I sent. She went inside the hut and brought out a letter.

It was from a Christian organization in Mutare, which was one among the dozens of organizations I'd sent letters to. It was a very short letter printed in rather large font. They would pay my school fees. In addition, they would give me a small living allowance.

I could not believe it. Was I dreaming? Before it had all sunk in, Mbuya was down on her knees thanking her God for answering those who believed.

Chapter 10. Farai

The two years of 'A' level studies went quickly. The final exams came and I made it to the University of Zimbabwe to study medicine. There are very few people in life who live their dreams and I was beginning to feel I was one of them. I was ecstatic to get a place at the University of Zimbabwe Medical School and vowed to myself that I would live to perform wonders for my family. I could already see a new life for Mbuya and for the rest of the extended family.

Life as a medical student was tough. Competition was intense and only the very best survived the tough first few years. Physiology produced most of the casualties with several students repeating the course or dropping out of medical school altogether.

One summer morning during a university break I woke up with an intense headache. It was so intense that I felt my head would split into two. I

contemplated one tablet of Paracetamol with codeine that I kept in my bag but was too lazy to get out of bed and fetch it. I lay in bed and gazed out through the window. The sun had just risen and its sparkling rays filtered through the horizon like artificial fireworks. A light breeze kept my opened window clattering softly in a sombre rhythm. Long shapeless shadows of Jacaranda trees waved unceremoniously past my window, padding off the rays from direct contact with my exhausted eyes, which had not been shut for very long during the entire night.

I forced myself up and walked towards the window. A frightened ‘go away’ bird fluttered its wings noisily as it flew away as if to deliberately annoy me. A noiseless, careful, flush of the water cistern told me that Mkwasha, my brother-in-law, was awake. He was an early bird. Even on weekends when he didn't have to go to work, he was up early. He would go to the little shop about a kilometre away from the house to buy a copy of the Bulawayo Chronicle to put beside my bedroom door.

It was only my third day in Bulawayo and yet my eyes and brain were already feeling the strain and fatigue from the continuous studying. I had gone to Bulawayo to stay with Sekai and her husband, Mkwasha, during one of my university vacations.

'Our place is quite conducive to studying,' Sekai had said. 'My husband is always at work and I am at college most of the time. You will have the house to yourself. If you get tired of studying you can always play with Farai. Otherwise I'll tell the house-girl that she shouldn't let him disturb you.'

I had taken up the offer immediately. Had she not offered I probably would have asked if I could go and stay with them. Going to their house was far better than going home to the village where I would have to read by candlelight or by a paraffin lamp light. When I was still in high school I often had do a number of pages under moonlight when Mbuya did not have candles or paraffin in the house.

Since the days Clever went to war and Misfortune died, Sekai and I had bonded really well. She had since married Mkwasha with whom I got on very well. He was an adorable man. A man blessed with kindness and good heartedness. Though he'd had had a difficult upbringing, with a life much harsher than ours, he had worked very hard for himself and had succeeded. Often he would narrate what he went through during his childhood, which made a mockery of our own difficult upbringing.

Mkwasha and Sekai had a son, Farai, who was six years old. I was very fond of him. Farai acted many years older than his age. Often he and I played for hours on end in front of their house, usually football. Whenever I wanted to see Beki, my new Bulawayo girlfriend from next door, it was Farai who went to call her. It was even he who had fixed me up with the Beki. Beki was Ndebele and did not speak much Shona. She did not speak much English either, so communication between us was difficult. Since Farai spoke both Shona and Ndebele, it was to him I turned to when I saw Beki.

The reward Farai got for fixing me up with Beki was a portable radio, which I had been given by a Welsh teacher when I was still in high school, after I had looked after his cat whilst he was away in Swansea on vacation. For an extra bribe of a music cassette, Farai had promised not to tell his parents about Beki.

At the tender age of six, Farai had already begun to see me as a role model. He liked everything about me. He was so proud of his uncle when he saw an old clip of me on national television, competing for my school in the national high school quiz competition. He told other small boys that 'his uncle' had been on television and that he would like to be on television too, when he grew up.

I spent a lot of time teaching him things, just like Clever used to do with me when I was little.

'Capital cities,' I would say.

'United Kingdom?'

'London.'

'Very good. United States of America?'

'Washington CD.'

'OK. But DC not CD, What about Zambia?'

'Lusaka.'

'South Africa?'

'Pretoria.'

'Very good, Farai. You are an exceptional talent'

He would then go and tell his parents that he was an exceptional talent.

I would often lift him up into my arms and throw him up into the air and grab him before he fell onto the ground. He loved it. His memory was phenomenal for a six-year-old.

Farai even liked the music I liked. On a number occasion I heard him attempting to sing 'Matters of the heart' by Don Williams, which was one of my favourite songs.

'Boy, you will spoil my child, he is too young for the things you teach him,' his mother would say. Farai was nonetheless quick to answer for himself.

'I am a big boy mom, and would like to grow up to be like Uncle Boy one day.'

The boy just continually amazed me with the questions he asked me. Often I failed to answer some of his questions. Questions such as 'uncle, why do you have many girlfriends?' caught me off guard.

During most of my university vacations, I went to stay with Mkwasha and Sekai, to study. My arrival was always a big day for Farai. He even asked his parents to buy us similar presents. On one occasion he embarrassed us all when he came

running into the lounge, pulled off his trousers and bragged about how his underwear was similar to mine. My mother and Mkwasha had both been sitting there in the room with neighbours who had come to greet my mother. I gave him one look, which he immediately understood. He had bolted out of the room, immensely embarrassed, just like an adult.

Finances were tight at the University of Zimbabwe. One morning during one of my stays in Bulawayo, Mkwasha came out of the bathroom shaking with laughter. He would not say why he was laughing so much, but a few moments later my sister came out of the bathroom holding the source of the laughter. A thread-bare toothbrush, colourless with age. Only a countable number of prickly brushes remained on the brush head.

'Is that what you call a graduate's toothbrush?' My sister asked, laughing. I found it embarrassing. Often I kept my toothbrush in my bag, but that morning I forgot it in the bathroom. It had lost most

of its brushes when I threw it into a kettle with boiling water back in the village.

'To kill bacteria,' I said to Mbuya when she asked what the ritual was.

'By cooking a toothbrush? You educated lot surprise me. You really believe anything can live on a toothbrush? A toothbrush, thrown into someone's mouth every single morning.' She laughed.

'Bacteria can live in strange places Mbuya.'

'What is bacteria?'

'Little organisms that can cause disease'

'And they leave on toothbrushes?'

I laughed. 'They live anywhere Mbuya.'

I had tried to explain about micro- organisms and how they may cause disease but my grandmother was not convinced.

'Illnesses are caused by the evil spirits, *mweya wetsvina*, not by imaginary things which live on toothbrushes.'

'I wonder if there is any other graduate in the whole world with a toothbrush like this.' Sekai ridiculed.

Though I was far from completing my studies Sekai and Mkwasha liked to call me a graduate.

'I am sorry Boy, but no one can help but laugh when they know how charming and well dressed you are and then see this toothbrush' she added and laughed again.

I thought about how I dressed. Pretty decently, I reckoned. But then people make opinions about us on the basis of how they see us in person, which naturally includes how we dress. Not often do people judge us by how or with what we brush our teeth. Not in the too distant past, both Sekai and I had used chewed twigs to brush our teeth. Everyone

in the village did. Using twigs from Mushumha or Mushonjiwa trees to brush our teeth and then spit the remnants without even gargling with water was very common in the village.

The toothbrush incident reminded me of the cyclist who was knocked off his bicycle down Second Street Extension, in Harare. He was hit hard and fell unconscious. He had been pretty well dressed, clad in a dark suit with a white shirt and red necktie. A few of my colleagues and I were walking up the street when the accident happened. One of the older students ran to the scene with the rest of us following behind him, most of us out of curiosity rather than from a genuine desire to help. The older student started by undoing the man's tie and then took off his shoes before putting him into a recovery position. That's when I noticed his white socks, all tattered and torn at the bottom, like they were chewed by termites. The top parts, which had stuck out of the shoes, looked new and clean. One of my colleagues whispered something about the socks to me, but I acted the reasonable medical and christianly student that I was by ignoring him.

Farai did not find the toothbrush incident funny. He stood there listening and eventually said, 'You know, mom, he does not have the money to buy a new toothbrush. He is a student.' His parents stopped laughing and looked at each other.

Later Farai asked, 'Uncle, what makes a toothbrush wear out?'

'Overuse, it wears off more quickly if it's the only one that one has.'

'If you had money would you buy many toothbrushes'?

'How many toothbrushes do you think one person needs'?

'Seven'

'Why seven?' I asked, surprised with the answer.

'So that you would change them every day of the week.'

I laughed at the logic.

'What about you, how many toothbrushes would you buy for yourself?' I asked.

'Just one,' he said solemnly.

'Why just one?' I asked again surprised at his answer.

'Because if I buy many, I will leave them behind when I die.'

'Who told you about dying? God looks after us. People usually die only when they grow old.' I said careful to contain this type of discussion with a six year old.

'A friend from school said his aunt's boy died.'

'Small boys are not supposed to talk about such things.'

'Will I die uncle?'

'Of course not! I don't want to hear you asking those questions.'

'Uncle, I don't want to die.'

'Of course you won't die. Remember when we pray to God we can ask him to let us live for a very long time.'

He kept silent for a while, like an adult thinking about his next plan in a crisis.

'But why does God let people die?'

'Why don't we get on with that game of football?' I said, trying to get out of this conversation.

We played football for a tiny while but the same sombre mood the boy was in never seemed to leave him. The questions had slightly disturbed me but I brushed them aside as merely children's talk.

Christmas Eve that year Sekai fell ill and was admitted to Bulawayo Central Hospital. I went over to see her. Mkwasha sat at the bottom of his wife's bed whilst Farai played outside the hospital by himself. Farai saw me first and led me into the ward. His mother was in bad shape. We stayed there with her until we were required to leave by the hospital authorities. On Christmas day we went to see her again. Though she looked better she still looked unwell and could not be discharged.

When we got home Mkwasha prepared sadza for dinner with stew and vegetables. Farai did not complain. He just seemed to understand that all was not well. We sat there in silence, eating. My eyes strayed up to Farai and I realised he was crying. Crying like an adult. Tears just trickling down his cheeks. I realised then that I was not eating.

Mkwasha just sat there, sombre, not knowing what to do or say.

Farai broke the silence.

'Dad, where have you ever seen people eating sadza on Christmas day?'

I kept quiet.

'Your mother will be out of hospital soon and everything will be ok again.' Mkwasha said.

Farai continued to cry

'Look, Farai if you continue crying your uncle will continue to cry too.' That caught me by surprise. I hadn't realised tears were trickling down my eyes.

That statement from Mkwasha seemed to have done the trick for the boy. I had once said to him when he was crying that crying was only for girls. Men were not supposed to cry, I'd said. He seemed

to look at me with a face that demanded an answer.
I looked away and dried my eyes.

A week before I left the country, Farai died.

Chapter 11. Mambara's House

Our hut was still standing after all these years: still derelict, needy, begging for attention. It was still the only property we owned. It was by the existence of this hut, by its mere existence, that we defined where we belonged. Human beings have to belong. They can't just float in the air like dust molecules, blowing with the wind as to when and where the wind decides to blow them.

It was my enrolment into a boarding school, which started it. My admission at the University of Zimbabwe consolidated it. The embarrassment. The mortification. The shame. How can a family with a child at the University live in a hut like that? How could the village point at such a building and say this is where he came from, the one who is more educated than anyone else in the village. The one who speaks better English that the legendary Father Grey himself. The one who could one day become the local Member of Parliament. The one who would see to it that development came to the

village, to the people. Better roads, clean drinking water, right there on people's doorsteps.

As soon as I started Form One, the embarrassment had begun. During school holidays, I would stay with one of my elder sisters in the city or rather stay at school, on the pretext that I wanted more time to study. I had looked up to Mkoma and Clever to build us a better home, somewhere where we would all feel pleased to go back to.

'There is need to build a decent house for Mbuya,' Mkoma had said way back before I'd finished primary school. I had looked forward to the time when that would happen.

It would be wonderful to come back home from school into a proper house, with an asbestos roof and compact, smooth floor. I had not wished for anything fancy. All that I wanted was something that resembled a house. Something made of bricks and with a hard floor, not mud, not plastered with cow dung.

My brothers promised but it never came. What with Machipisa? Their world still began at Machipisa and ended at Machipisa. Rotating around women and spinning around alcohol.

The embarrassment had grown as I finished high school and entered university. Sekai could see it.

'It has to change,' Sekai urged. 'Mbuya needs a house. We all need a house. If you come home from the university where will you sleep? What if you bring your friends home? Where are you going to put them? In that hut, with all the soot and smoke?'

I had agreed that change was necessary.

Building a house had then been my first goal after I was accepted into university. Soon I decided to play it tough and embark on that project, a fulfilment of my dreams and a small present for my grandmother, a way of saying 'thank you' for bringing me up. One can never say 'thank you' enough to someone for bringing one up, for tending

to you and seeing you grow like a seedling. The best you can do is to try.

I knew the whole village was watching me embark upon the project. They were watching for another Mambara. When I was growing up everyone who built castles in the air was referred to as Mambara. Mambara was a legend, the villager with ambition. Long before we were born Mambara had stumbled across a wallet full of money. He had decided to use the money to build himself a house, a mansion by our community standards. Old Mambara, proud, ambitious and wishful started on his seven-bedroom house. The house took shape, the foundation went up, the walls went up and soon they had reached window level. Then the building stopped.

Poor Old Mambara had not known how to budget. He had not known how much he needed for the project. What size of house he needed to build. He had run out of money and it had happened abruptly. He had exhausted every single penny of the money that he had found. The money that he

had found in a wallet, which had been dropped by a white farmer, was no more. The fact that it belonged to a white farmer had given Old Mambara an incentive to use the money. He considered it as atonement for the abuse they had received from the District Commissioner's office in Umtali.

For years, old Mambara's unfinished house stood in the village, decorated by overgrown grass in the interior and exterior. Moulds and fungi of every colour plastered the red brick surfaces making an unordered checkers board design. Rats and mice competed to burrow through the aging building, daring their nemeses, the cobras, to move into close proximity with their traditional foes, the humans. It was as if the rats and mice knew that every homestead in the village had kept long sticks in secluded corners waiting to thrash the legless ones if they ventured too close for their comfort.

As children we played hide and seek in Mambara's unfinished house, oblivious of what it represented. Unlived dreams. Unfulfilled ambition. Old Mambara had been arrested soon after his

money ran out. He was taken to Odzi Police Station for stealing a white farmer's money. A neighbour reported him. Old Mambara never returned from jail. He died there. But his ambitions never left the village. They stood there in our midst, vocal, loud, clear.

As the whole the village watched me embark on my insane project, they saw another Mambara. I looked at myself and saw another Mambara. How could a student build a house? It had never happened in the village before, and beyond. Several other Mambaras had tried building houses and ended up being nothing but Mambaras. Standing all over the village were uncompleted houses of all sorts and in all shapes and forms: foundation level, window level, gable level, roof level. Various levels of ambitions thwarted; all victims of having not.

For me, a house had not only been an ambition but it had also been a dream; a childhood, adolescent, adulthood dream. It was a living wish, with a soul, a body and a spirit of its own, created with the hope that Mbuya would live in a proper

house, with asbestos roofing and cement floor. Not that Mbuya had ever complained. She never complained, not about anything. She always accepted what she got. What her God, whom she said was a living God, had given her.

The government gave us grants and loans as soon we were enrolled into university. Not much, not little. Most of my colleagues bought enormous, ear-bursting sound systems; some chose to spoil themselves at several of the new nightclubs mushrooming around Harare. Those with better financial backgrounds went even further and bought themselves second-hand Japanese cars. I chose to build a house. I would go home to the village every other month to inspect the progress of the project.

Slowly, the house rose, at a pace consistent with my student resources. When things became tough, I borrowed money from colleagues and paid them back after the next student payout. Once, when things were really biting I borrowed money from one of my lecturers. He was a kind hearted sixty-five year old nationalist who had consistently

underachieved during his thirty years at the University of Rhodesia, even though it was claimed he had acquired his PhD in a record two-year period at the University of Bath in England.

A few months after I graduated, it stood tall. Resplendent in pink, with elegant, asbestos roofing. Proud. It was the proudest of houses, the completion of a transition. The poorest family in the village now had a brick house with asbestos roofing.

'People in the village will not be happy.' Sekai said 'Such an achievement would need consultations with *vaprofita,* prophets of religion*;* to make sure the family is protected.'

When I came home the weekend after the house was completed, Mbuya cried. Tears of joy. I smiled importantly at myself as Mbuya knelt, praising God, for giving her grandchildren.

To Mbuya, the house meant so much, more than just prestige. During the rainy seasons she had never slept throughout her entire life. A rainy night would mean she would have to stay awake and sweep out buckets and buckets of water leaking into the hut through the decaying grass thatched roof. When I was tiny, Mbuya would wrap me in one of her better blankets and put me into one corner that remained dry when it rained. Once, Mbuya scolded Sekai, who was caught praying that God would not bring rain at night so that we could sleep.

Mbuya and I walked round the house, side by side when I broke the news. We were standing between the two structures, the old hut and the new house. One signifying where we came from and the other where we were going. I had suggested that we had the hut demolished, but Mbuya refused. It would serve as her kitchen whereas the new house would be the sitting room, bedroom, and the storeroom. We sat on the veranda of the new house and then I broke the news, in the traditional way.

'Mbuya, I have something to tell you,' I said, not too sure how I would put this across.

'*Iwe*, do not scare me. What is it? Did you make someone's daughter pregnant?'

Elders. Every time you tell them you have something important to discuss the first thing that comes to their mind is that you have eaten the forbidden fruit.

'No, no Mbuya, it's nothing like that.'

'That's a relief, if this were to happen, everything should follow through the right channels.'

'I know Mbuya, if I decide to get married, we will do so in a church.'

She could not hide the wide beam on her aging face. A church wedding would give her the ultimate satisfaction. It's one of the two most important things she had prayed for in life, that one of her

grand children would go to England and that one would have a church wedding.

'Mbuya I shall be leaving soon,' I pressed.

'Going back to the city? You have never formalized your goodbyes before. What is different this time?'

'No, Mbuya, I don't mean going back to the city. I shall be leaving the country.'

I could almost see her heart missing a beat. She seemed not to know what to make of it.

'I am going to continue studying Mbuya; I will come back as soon as I have finished.'

'I thought you were done with education. Didn’t you finish university? What else is left?'

'Yes, Mbuya, I am a doctor now. I can treat patients but what I want to do is to teach others to

become doctors. I want to come back and work in the university to train others.'

That was the simplest way I could put it to her.

She seemed to be content with the explanation.

'So where are you going? South Africa?'

'No Mbuya,' I said, having waited for this moment to take the plunge. She listened and waited.

'Scotland.' I pronounced, at last.

Chapter 12- The Queues for Sheep and Goats

The whole family was at the airport, every single one of them. When I did a head count, there were seventeen of us in the group, only one travelling. We stood in small groups like puddles of stagnant water after a rainstorm. Excitedly, people hopped from one puddle to another, all trying to show in words, emotions and deeds what a hole my departure would drill into the family structure. For many in the family, this day would be an important landmark in their lives. For a start, it was their first time ever to be at an airport, so minor incidents on that day would be forever remembered. In fact, my sister-in-law had already begun to construct stories to tell others, the moment she'd walked into the terminal.

'White people really do have bad manners. Look at those two young people right there, behind the silver trolleys,' she muttered, peeking in the general direction of the two young people as if having a

proper look would cause lightning to strike. I looked. Two white teenagers stood arm in arm with undisguised affection for each other. Still, it didn't need a penetrating mind to understand that for the village mind, standing arm in arm in public could indeed be a great story at the boreholes, firewood and washing places. And knowing my sister-in-law, I was pretty sure there would be a lot of spices added to this story, such as 'had it not been for the mob who threatened to beat them up those teenagers would have done it, right there, in front of us all.'

My sister-in-law went from group to group drawing attention to what she had just witnessed.

'*Matwuona here twuvarungu, turikubatana apo pachena chena. Ende zvakaoma,* Have you seen the two white kids smooching in public? What a disgrace.'

Mbuya immediately came to me and warned me against losing my virtues there in Scotland. Mbuya still had the picture of a heavenly Britain in her mind. The picture which had been planted in her by

Father Grey those years back through sermons. I had listened to one such sermon, when a supercharged Father Grey described Britain as a land of plenty, a land full of riches, a land of milk and honey like the biblical Israel. Britain was the land where broken hearts were mended and shattered souls healed. It was full of righteous, kind-hearted people with relentless appetite to help the poor and give to the needy. People in Britain loved God; they knew how to pray and their practice of Christianity was unparalleled.

Tired of being preached to, I left my family and wandered about the small airport. For the first time is my life I felt really important and carried myself in such a manner. I felt I looked educated with my casual blue jeans and a pair of reading glasses, which I really didn't need, but I thought it complemented my new status as an educated young African on the way to Britain.

I smiled importantly at everyone who dared look my way, talking to anyone who appeared like they wanted to talk and threw more English words into

my Shona than I usually did. I even once stopped to greet a group of touristy looking geriatrics, who stood about in Khaki shorts and T-shirts labelled ‘The Big Five’, clutching tall wooden giraffe souvenirs as if it was the only sure way to prove that one had indeed been to Africa.

Harare International Airport terminal, a double story pink painted building, looked small and colonial.

'Our airport is a disgrace to the country,' one of my lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe had once said after he had flown back from Nairobi.

'Our airport is a disgrace,' I said to a couple of folks who looked my age and possibly headed to the United Kingdom too, most likely for the same purpose.

'They will be building a new one soon, just a stone's throw away from here,' one of the guys said. 'The government plans to have an airport that is even better than Heathrow,' he added.

The other listener and I simply looked at each other, not too sure how to respond to the Heathrow statement. After all, Heathrow was in Britain. How could an airport in a poor African country ever be better than one in Britain?

After what seemed like a decade of waiting, I finally walked up the narrow stairs into the elegant flying machine. I felt like a ceremonial god as I walked past two hostesses directing people to their seats. I looked back for the last time to see my family who were perched like small birds on the aging airport balcony. They were waving fervently. A few of the younger ones even tried to out jump each other in an effort to be seen. I waved back at them, with a deliberate effort to produce a civilised wave. I smiled broadly, more at myself than at any one in particular, as I disappeared into the elegant Boeing 737.

The flight to London was mainly smooth with a few bumps during the last quarter of the trip. Yes, bumps in the sky! I had once thought Mr. Bones, our high school Geography teacher a liar when he

told us of a torrid time he had had flying from Johannesburg to Harare. The flight had been very bumpy, he said. As if the plane was being driven on the undulating hills of Rwanda. 'Turbulence' that's what the voice which came through the intercom system was said. 'Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seat belts. We will be expecting some turbulence for the next thirty minutes. Please remain seated while the seatbelt sign is switched on.'

We arrived in London incredibly early in the morning. It was fuzzy, drizzly and grey. As soon as we disembarked, people ran to the immigration counter, as if there was a prize awaiting those who managed to approach the counters first. After waiting patiently for more than three hours to board the plane, then sitting in the air for over eight hours, what difference could the fifteen or so minutes of standing in the immigration queue make? Still, people rushed like cows to a deep tank, keen to be the first at the counter, to get served and then to go and wait for an hour or so for their luggage to arrive. Human beings!

The counters were divided into two sections. Like in heaven. One for the Jews, one for gentiles. One for the sheep. One for the goats. One for the meek at heart. One for the hard hearted. The judges sat on tall stools, waiting to judge those who made the grade to heaven and those who didn't, distinguishing between those who were born in the right places and those who were not.

I walked towards my gate -- the gate for the goats. It was signposted 'OTHER', as if 'other' held a special meaning. The counter for the sheep was called, 'EU, American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Passport Holders'. (A few other countries that belonged to the sheep club were also listed.) The sheep were the pious, the selected ones, who did not need any disruptions, who did not want to be inconvenienced, who had important commitments ahead. Neither did they harbour any terrorists amongst them. I followed in line with the World Order. This was shown by the blue ribbons, which guided the 'OTHER' path. We were those that could not be trusted, those that had sought to run from their places of birth at the first opportunity,

and those that entered heaven with the intention of never returning.

A number of people not too dissimilar to me followed. When I got to the counter I stood behind a man who sounded Nigerian, or Ghanaian, I couldn't tell. He was a big, dark, heavy chap with heavy dreadlocks matched by a heavy accent. Judging from the tone of his voice and the time it was taking him to get cleared, the immigration officer was obviously giving him a torrid experience. At only twenty-something years of age, the young immigration officer was right at his prime with regard to enthusiasm. He had a lot of zeal. The rules of heaven demanded order and he was merely enforcing it.

I looked behind and saw there were no other people behind me. The queues from the other 'OTHERS' sections were packed but moving. A plump, over-perfumed Indian woman with a tent-sized sari, who was obviously delighted to be in England whispered loudly to a younger companion, who was perhaps her daughter. From the loudness

of the voice she spoke in, it seemed her ears had not popped from her long trip from Mumbai *via* Kuwait.

'As arule ofthump,'[sic] she whispered loudly, 'Never go behind Africans, they always have problems. You will never get to the counter.' The companion glanced around uncomfortably, uneasy that her mother could be heard. I certainly had heard. I did not want to make a meal out of it. She was after all, Indian and happily protected her lower middle position within the World's pecking order. Where I grew up, such a social order had been official, even ratified. The plush suburbs in Borrowdale and beyond were intended for the all domineering white race, the lower top was for Chinese, the medium density suburbs like Arcadia were for Indians and those of mixed race, leaving the crowded suburbs like Highfields for those at the bottom. Those who enjoyed leftovers, those who cooked and cleaned the dishes for everyone else. Those who were happy to serve –the black people.

I looked around and realised that the Mumbai woman was probably not just speaking for herself but for many. In every queue where someone had an African looking passport, not too many people would come and stand behind them. It was the particular passport one had that was the gateway to heaven, a Nigerian friend who had a fake Belgian passport later said. It wasn't your status, or your educational level, or your money. A university professor with seven degrees, who held a ‘stupid’ passport, was deemed inadequate. Yet a school dropout, or a drugged up junkie from Glasgow could walk freely into any country like a king. Life!

The Nigerian man took more than thirty minutes before he was chaperoned to a small office above the immigration counters, as we all looked on. The intended lesson for the onlookers was that there is indeed a world order. Those who break it can be displayed in the open for all to see.

Chapter 13: FROZEN SCOT

The weather was the first thing that struck me when I arrived in Scotland. Before I left Zimbabwe, I had been warned. One white lady who knew my sister Charity and claimed to be a direct descendant of the great Scot, David Livingston himself, had undergone the pain, even, of buying me thermal underwear.

Before I'd left it was difficult to put into perspective the degree of coldness I'd encounter. Consequently, I hardly had the right clothes and my first few days in Aberdeen were miserable. Whenever I got out of my modest student room I was a moving wardrobe, wrapped in as many of my clothes as my body would support. I would wrap my head in a thick woollen scarf and then pull an oversized woollen monkey-hat over it. Underneath a heavy winter coat I would wear a thick winter shirt over a couple of extra large cotton T-shirts. I saw a few locals smother a laugh when they met me walking along Union Street. When it snowed I had already had enough. I wanted to go back home.

All the same, the Aberdonians were friendly lot. They were pleasant people and always wore a smile. Later, though, my newfound friend, Graham, said this was all faked. One thing I quickly learnt was that, unlike at home, people here were all individuals. They weren't clans, or tribes, or villages -- not even families. The world revolved around each person as an individual. Back at home the world revolved around communities. Everyone belonged to one big family. The man next door was an uncle by virtue of him living next door. The woman down the village was an aunt by virtue of her having a surname that rhymed with yours. And there were all those relatives who were so because they shared a totem with you.

In the village back home, when you encountered someone you would always stop and greet them, even if you did not know who they were.

'Good afternoon mother,' you would say if you met someone about your mother's age.

'Good afternoon son,' she would say. 'By the way whose child are you?' she would ask if she did not recognise you.

You would always mention a member of the family most likely to be known in the community. I for instance would always mention Mbuya since she was well known because of her Christian virtues.

In Scotland people only lived as individuals. To my friend, Graham, family was mother, father, and sister. That's all. What each individual owned was his or hers, whereas at home, if a brother, for instance, owned something, it meant the whole family owned it; the whole extended family. My family would often turn up at aunt's house in Waterfalls unannounced. Aunt's house in Waterfalls always looked like a refugee camp. Different sorts of cousins and nephews -- some who did not even know each other -- would just appear, without food or money, and expect to be looked after as long as they wished to stay. Aunt never turned anyone away. Then, whenever the guest decided it was time to go back to whichever village from which they'd

come, it was aunt who had to find money for their bus fare. In addition, the guest would expect to be given some groceries to take back to their own families.

I stayed for a few weeks in Aberdeen before I made any friends. One cold Friday evening, a friendly-looking fellow student had knocked on my door and asked if I didn't feel lonely locking myself up in my room.

'No, I am quite fine,' I shot back. All I was thinking about during those first few weeks was studying, finishing up and going back home.

'Ok then,' he responded. 'Sorry for bothering ya. It's just that I see you are in your room all the time and thought maybe you would want to come to the pub with us.' He had a strange accent; an Aberdonian accent, as I later learnt. It was not easy to understand him, but I could see he was trying his best to speak slowly for me.

His mentioning of the pub reminded me of what the self acclaimed David Livingston's niece had said to me in her numerous 'Going to Scotland,' tokens of advice.

'In Scotland, friends are made at the pub,' she had remarked. 'Even those who do not drink go to the pub to make friends.

My mind also remembered Mbuya's words. 'Alcohol, not money was the root of all evil.' I am pretty sure this statement had first come from Father Grey.

'No,' I can't go to a pub! I mean I can't go out tonight.' I quickly corrected myself, not wanting to sound barbaric.

'What about tomorrow? We are at the Kings Street Mill every evening if you like,' he announced proudly, as if going to a pub every single evening was an achievement.

'I guess I can come on one of the evenings.' I said, trying to avoid making a firm commitment.

'Grand! I will come for you tomorrow, then.'

He was off before I could protest.

The next day he was at my door at around the same time. Graham was his name. He had two other guys with him, Neil from Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Craig who spoke in a worse accent than Graham's Aberdonian.

'Hey dude, you are struggling with Craig's accent are ya? He is from Glasgow and these lads have a terrible accent. They speak like goats,' Graham said and laughed.

'No, it's not that bad.' I muttered, trying to upgrade my own listening skills rather than comment on Craig’s accent. 'And where are you from?' I queried Graham.

'I am from the Broch mate, nae far from here' he said, catching me off guard by his 'nae'.

Later I had looked for 'Broch' on a map of Aberdeenshire and I failed to find it. A girl in my class later told me that the Broch was the area around Fraserburgh, a small community forty or so miles North of Aberdeen.

My new friends spent the evening talking about football, politics and women. I could only understand about a quarter of the conversation. It was much easier understanding Neil, who said though he lived in Newcastle he was born and grew up in Kent. He spoke slowly and deliberately, more like Mr. Bones back in high school.

Somewhere in the middle of the drinks Graham thought he felt hungry and asked us if we fancied something to eat. I was not particularly hungry but I went with the floor and said yes. I had fish and chips, which were not particularly good, but it was a pub meal, so no big deal. That's what Graham had said.

We stayed until midnight. The three guys were visibly drunk. Throughout the night they exerted unrelenting pressure for me to drink but I refused, giving the excuse that I had a sore throat and could not drink. Strangely I found it embarrassing to admit that I did not drink at all.

Just before the pub closed I stood up to go and I gratefully thanked Graham for inviting me out.

'No worries mate,' he said preparing to go as well, 'but hey dude you owe me money.'

I owed him money? I could not figure out immediately how I owed him any money.

'The fish and chips mate, I paid for it?

I hadn't forgotten. It's just that Graham had asked if I wanted to eat. Back at home if someone asks if you want something it means they want to buy if for you. I groped in my pockets and gasped. I already knew I hadn't brought any money with me.

'Oops, looks like I have forgotten my wallet in my room.' I lied.

'No worries mate', Graham conceded. You will give it to me some other time. Let's hit the road.

From that day on Graham and I became friends. Often he invited me for weekends with his parents in Fraserburgh. His parents were wonderful people. Graham said they had never had a black person in the house before. One dilemma that quickly emerged was what to call Graham's parents.

'I will call your mom, mother and you dad father,' I'd suggested to Graham.

'Sorry mate, but I don't think they will accept that'

'Why not?' I uttered, shocked.

'Because they're not your parents. Just call them Sue and Bob. My folks will be ok with that.'

It did not sound right to me. Back at home I always addressed my friends' parents as mother and father. Just like my parents. Eventually we agreed that I would address them as Mr and Mrs McGregor.

With time, Graham and I were together more often than not. On weekends we often went clubbing together, even though I still resisted alcohol, still giving all sorts of lame excuses. One day we went up to a Ceilidh, a traditional Scottish dance, in Peterhead, a few miles outside Aberdeen. Graham had some friends there.

'You have been living in the country for a while now dude don't you think it's time you try a kilt on,' I laughed thinking it was a joke.

'I am not joking mate, I mean it.'

'A kilt on a black man, are you sure I won't be the first one?'

Graham laughed.

On the eve of the Ceilidh, Graham borrowed a kilt from one of his friends and helped me put it on.

'You look stunning, mate!' he proclaimed.

'I think I will be in the Press and Journal,' I agreed. 'The first black man in a kilt in Aberdeen.'

We had both laughed.

'The only problem is that I would have to look after you, you would be fending off the girls with your hand like flies,' Graham said, pushing me towards a mirror.

Indeed I looked grand: A black man in a light green Flower of Scotland kilt. Graham had tried to push his luck by attempting to lure me to go as a 'True Scotsman', but I would have none of it. There was no way I would put on that skirt without my underwear on.

No sane African man would.

Chapter14. Diane

I had been to ceilidhs a few times before and I had loved every bit of it. When Graham and I got to Peterhead I had not waited for an invitation to hop onto the dance floor and put into practice the passion of the African youth. Dancing. I seized the earliest possible opportunity and leapt onto the dance floor, eyes instinctively scanning the surroundings for vulnerable females in the crowd. The sight of a black man in kilt brought cheers as I mingled and chatted as if I belonged.

Not long after, I was skirting and gliding around the dance floor like an excited bullock. One brunette girl whose eyes had appeared locked onto my black legs the moment I entered the scene hooked up with me and together we were a couple on the move. She was a buddle of energy, but so was I. I pulled her this way while she tugged me that way as we glided on the wooden floor, hopping and galloping like excited gazelles, nodding our heads in sync with the tune of 'Strip the Willow'. I asked the band to do

'Strip the Willow' again and again, and they gladly obliged.

As my newfound partner heard the tune of 'The Dashing White Sergeant' she went berserk and somehow managed to drag me with her into her world of happiness. We tugged at each other with so much vigour and energy that my upper limbs were sore for the next two days. The crowd applauded and at one time stopped completely to watch, the energy, the exuberance and the contrasting demeanours. Eventually we exhausted each other, and my dancing partner followed me to my seat.

'You are such a good dancer', she said extending her hand to me and introducing herself as Diane.

'Thank you,' I said looking at her with some extra-dancing attention for the first time. 'You too! You are amazing.' I said smiling at her, revealing my white African teeth, which were probably made to look even whiter in the semi-darkness.

'Thank you. And by the way, I really like your kilt,' she said flirtatiously and leaning towards me as she said it.

'No, not really,' I said and immediately realised that I should have said 'thank you'. In my culture we do not say 'thank you' to complements. When someone passes compliments to you, you have to try and say something that portrays the insignificance of it all. For instance, if you tell a girl that she is pretty she can easily tell you to go to hell, without meaning it of course.

I looked at Diane, scrutinising her: The head, the bosom, down to the lower limbs. She was very pretty, about one hundred and seventy centimetres tall with a strong athletic body, an average body weight, big and firm behind, rather big for a white woman. She had a white top on, which bulged as if that which lay underneath it was solid, stone-hard material. In my boarding school, where girls were called all sorts of names such girls were called Dairiboard, after the Zimbabwean company that manufactured milk products. Diane had round blue

eyes and long brunette hair that she allowed to flow freely behind her, as if she had no control over it.

Then the band played the 'Gay Gordon's', which made Dianne go wild. We were up in no time and started punishing the floor. When we eventually sat down, aching and drenched in sweat Diane reminded me that I hadn't told her my name.

'Boy,' I offered, casually.

'Boy?

'Aye. Boy,' I said, surprising myself with the Scottish 'aye.'

'Boy, as in a boy?'

'Right'

'I don't mean to be rude, but you are only kidding, right?'

'No, I am not kidding. That is my name, Boy.'

'Okey, dokey' she responded, still unconvinced, 'Boy it is then'

Diane and I danced together throughout the night. Graham could tell I was enjoying myself, so he left us alone.

'Can, I ask you a silly question Boy?'

'Fire away lass,' I said mimicking Graham's accent.

'Are you a true Scotsman?'

I smiled, mischievously.

'Aye, I lied,' with the 'aye' premeditated this time.

'Can, I see?' she said pretending to be tipsier than she really was.

Graham had given me hints on how this question should be answered. 'One always has to name a price, either a pint of lager or a kiss.' Graham had said and laughed.

Diane laughed when I named my price.

'You could even get more than what you bargained for lad,' she said as she laughed again.

After the ceilidh, Diane asked if Graham and I would go to her flat for a cupper. She lived with a friend in a flat right in the centre of Peterhead. After consulting with Graham we agreed no harm would be done. So we went.

A few days after this first encounter Diane and I became an item, happily so. That same week she said she was in love with me. I liked her very much but was not too sure of the 'love thing'. Diane and I spent a lot of time together. She was happy to have found me. She had always wanted to be involved with a coloured man, she said. I hated being called coloured. At home coloureds referred to people from mixed marriages and I was not one. I was

black, pure bred. Not that I had any problem with being of a mixed race. In fact I thought it was pretty and adorable to be one, but I just wasn't one.

When sober, Diane was on the quiet side. She did not talk much. On most weekends I would go up to Peterhead. This was a better arrangement than Diane coming to Aberdeen since I lived in one room in students' halls of residence. During weekdays she would always call me on the phone but expect me to do most of the talking. She would listen and laugh at every joke I made, even the really bad ones. Diane's feelings for me quickly outgrew my own feelings for her. Once I began to feel the pressure of these feelings, I began to look for ways to withdraw from the relationship, involuntarily at first but then more deliberately once I realised how determined Diane was to keep the relationship. I began to find her company not as pleasurable as it had been when we had first met. I spent less and less time with her. Even though I was becoming visibly unhappy Diane did not show any signs of letting go. She said to Graham she was not about to let go the best thing that had ever happened to her life.

One Saturday morning while I sat reading the Scottish Sun at her flat Diane said, casually, that she hadn't been taking her contraceptive pills, deliberately.

'Diane what are you on about?' I asked, unperturbed at first.

'I have not been taking those damn pills.'

My heart missed a beat. She did not appear to be joking.

'You are joking, right?'

'Nope, I am not.'

'Diane you could get pregnant, you know.'

'Well,'

'Well, what? At least you could be more responsible.'

'Well, what if that's what I want?' she said, portraying arrogance I had not seen in her before. This made me angry.

'Let's leave it at that, I sincerely hope this won't be something that we would both regret.'

'What's there to regret?' She said and laughed.

'Diane, this is not funny.'

'You know your problem? You worry too much'.

A few weeks after this incident, Graham and I were in Glasgow visiting one of his friends. As soon as we arrived in Glasgow Diane called me on Graham's mobile phone. I did not have a mobile phone of my own.

'What's up Di?'

'Sweetheart, I think I am pregnant.'

'Don't sweetheart me Diane, what are you playing at?'

'I am not playing at anything B; I am pregnant, with your baby.'

'Could be a false pregnancy, you know.'

'I have done a pregnancy test three times, all positive. Today I have been feeling pretty crappie and went to the Infirmary where they confirmed I am pregnant.'

I froze on the phone, as if the mere mention of the word pregnant stopped my physiological action potentials from firing.

'Well say something,' Diane said.

I could not believe the nerve that woman had.

'I am heading back to Aberdeen,' I said to Graham, who looked puzzled at the promptness of the statement.

'Everything ok big man?'

'A few things to sort out with Di,' I said, struggling to hide my emotions.

Graham knew something was amiss, but he was never one to push. He knew I would talk when the time was right. He saw me off at the bus station. The journey from Glasgow to Aberdeen appeared the longest journey I had ever embarked on in my entire life. I lost my temper whenever the coach stopped and kept looking at my watch and swearing as if the watch was responsible for all the woes in my life.

When I got to Aberdeen I immediately jumped onto a Stagecoach bus to Peterhead. When I got to Di's flat my head was spinning round and round like a hula hoop round a dexterous child's hip. The world seemed to spin visibly, and faster.

'So you are pregnant?' – they were the first words I uttered.

'I told you so,' she remarked and looked away.

I looked at her. Every part of her body looked pregnant. For the first time in our relationship she looked really ugly and unworthy of me.

My inner self questioned how I could have been involved with such an unworthy, ugly woman, only interested in trapping unsuspecting me into an unplanned marriage. My exterior being emitted the raw anger that the inner being generated.

'So?' I asked angrily.

'So what, Dr Boy? I am pregnant with your baby. She only ever addressed me as Dr. Boy when she was angry. 'Is that too difficult to comprehend?'

'How long had you been planning this Diane?'

'Planning what?'

'How long have you been planning to trap me into this?'

She kept her cool for a moment and then she exploded.

'What do you mean trap? You are not an animal that gets trapped are you?'

'But you did this on purpose.'

'I told you I wanted it. I wanted the baby.'

'And you just planned it just like that with no qualms about how I felt? How low can you stoop Diane?'

'That’s your opinion, Boy. All that matters now is I am pregnant with your baby and we should begin to prepare for it.'

'We? I am not part of your conniving deceit,' I shouted angrily.

'Too late' she proffered calmly, obviously trying successfully to contain her anger. 'I suggest we move on and prepare for the poor soul inside of me, rather than stand here and quarrel like uncivilised people, like people who still live in trees.'

I exploded, 'Over my dead body, you stupid bitch, you have been scheming this all along. How so selfish of you, you just wanted to keep me in your empty, boring life and the only way you could think of is falling pregnant. Can you really stoop that low?'

That should have stunned her and maybe it did. I had been upset with her before, but she had never seen me like this. It got her scared, which explains why she remained calm, stunned. Her calmness got me into frenzy. I paced up and down the flat cursing and swearing. I stamped my feet and punched the air with anger. I thank God Diane did not say a word. Although I knew it was the wrong thing to do, I would have slapped her, slapped her stupid pregnant belly.

Eventually I managed to calm down enough to speak. 'I am sorry Diane but you got all your cards wrong,' I stated. '*Wakama yarumura,* I spoke to her in Shona, which literally meant you have milked a cow with no calf, which produces no milk. I said it to annoy her, knowing very well that she would not understand me.

'So now that it's done, what do you suggest we do?' she posed her question, once again calm and collected.

'I said I don't want to play any part in this. Don't you have ears, and are you too dumb to understand?'

'Listen who is talking? Who is the devout Christian betweejnus?'

This made me think for a few seconds, before I quickly brushed the remark aside as blackmail.

'Listen, woman, Christian or no Christian I don't want a baby. Is that too hard too understand?'

'That's alright with me,' Diane intoned. You can play no part in the baby's upbringing if that's what you want, but I am going to keep the baby.'

'Do I have no say in this?'

'You are choosing to have no say,' she remarked, and looked away.

I paced round the flat a number of times, still cursing and then stormed out. I heard her sob as soon as I negotiated the last few downwards stairs. Then I kept walking towards the bus station.

Chapter 15. BBC

Life in the Scotland proved to be hard. Though I had a comfortable scholarship, there was hardly any extra cash left after taking care of all the essentials. Important to me was repatriating a little cash home every now and again for Mbuya. And of course once in a while I wanted to go out with friends. The only way to fund this was by finding a part time job. Since I was in full time education and my programme was very intensive the only realistic time to do any part time job was at night or during weekends. On weekends, I would have to balance working, doing assignments and having a social life. I convinced myself that I could juggle it all, so I began looking for work.

The first job I got was a weekend job at a fish-processing factory north of Aberdeen. A Kenyan friend, Gitutu, had suggested this job, after I had spent weeks searching, with no success. Gitutu worked part time at the same factory.

'Forget that you have a medical degree and take anything that comes your way,' he had said to me after I expressed my frustration. 'Look at me; I have a PhD in Sociology. Survival comes before pride *rafiki,* friend. Besides, it's not like one is in his own country where he can pick and choose. Beggars can't be choosers.'

I went to the factory with Gitutu. His supervisor was a jovial skinny old man from Inverness. The stench of fresh fish made it difficult for me to concentrate. It disturbed me so much that for several months afterwards I could not eat fish.

Most of the workers at the fish factory were a cheerful bunch. One stout guy, in an attempt to be friendly, kept saying '*hakuna matata'* every time our eyes met. I had only just learnt from Gitutu that *hakuna matata* meant 'no problem' in Swahili. I suppose my stout friend thought every African spoke the same language.

The other workers cracked jokes and laughed all the time. Most of the times I did not understand the

jokes. Mostly because of the deep Scottish accent. It is one thing understanding someone speaking in a strange accent, understanding jokes in such an accent is another. Even when I had managed to pick up every single word, sometimes I just did not get the jokes. We all have different jokes in our different cultures, a different sense of humour, even different swear words. I remember once when I was in high school. Mr. Bones our Geography teacher had had an altercation with one of the school gardeners. Angry at the white man for what ever he had wronged him, the man shouted '*Mai wamaiwako*'. We all fell silent, as if someone had been struck by lightning. Sensing the caretaker must have said something grossly unpalatable to cause all the students to suddenly fall so silent the teacher asked what had been said. I told him what it meant, literally, 'Mother of your mother.'

'What has she got to do with this?' the teacher had asked.

'Everything sir, don't ever let anyone call you that,' I said.

He had laughed at the silliness of it all. But it wasn't silly. 'Mother of your mother' is just not the phrase you want to throw at someone from my country. Call him anything else but that!

Though the people at the fish factory were nice, I found the job too physically demanding. It was beginning to affect my performance in class. I gave it up and took up a job as a night porter at a hotel in Union Street, just on Friday evenings. In theory the job had seemed as if it would be lighter, but I soon found the going tough. After every function at the hotel, which happened almost every Friday evening it was my responsibility to clear the tables and chairs, clear up all the mess and sweep and vacuum the whole place. It was a mammoth task for only one person. I usually got to complete my chores around six o'clock in the morning after having started work at 5.00pm the previous evening. When I got home on Saturday mornings, all I could do was sleep. This interfered with my assignments. In addition, the four pounds per hour that the job was paying me was hardly much considering I was

working only one day a week so I quit only a few weeks after I had started. After these two attempts at part time jobs, I promised myself I was simply going to concentrate on my studies. No more part time jobs. It would mean less money to spend, but I would live with it.

Soon after I had made this resolution not to work, I broke it. Gitutu came to tell me of a 'gold mine' that he had been introduced to; working in old people's homes. He said when he heard of the hourly rates being paid to do caring jobs he couldn't resist. The money was just too good compared to what we used to get at the fish factory. Gitutu suggested I give it a try. In addition, he said, I could even choose the nights that I wanted to work. I could even afford not to go if I had too many assignments provided I told the supervisor in advance.

Like at the fish factory, Gitutu took me to meet his new supervisor. Margie, that was her name, said she was originally from Ireland but had lived in Aberdeen for over two decades. She was a middle

aged woman who at first looked mean, but as one got to know her better she was a pleasant, considerate person with a human heart. At the care home she said she did not feel that she was merely doing a job, but she was helping people. She said this was the approach that she wanted all her employees to adopt. Margie asked me a number of questions, nothing unusual, and said she would be happy to offer me a job at the care home. She said she had quite a number of Africans working there and that she had been very pleased with the way they worked.

'Very dedicated people, your lot are, very dedicated to their work.' Margie said to me of Africans, as if all Africans belonged to me.

I chose the evenings that preceded late starts at college. I soon found out that caring for the old was not as easy as Gitutu and Margie had made it appear. Though most of the elderly people in the home were nice, there were a few who were nasty, a few who still viewed being black as a crime. Some were like children, once they make up their mind

that they did not like you they would adhere to it. Like a two-year old who sees a face he doesn't like and makes a point of screaming whenever that person comes near him.

'I don't like you a piece,' intoned a ninety-something year old woman, whose name was Jenny, after I brought her a bowl of soup.

I looked at her, but did not say anything.

'Why did you come to this country?' she said contorting her face as if I was some sort of pain in some unscratchable place.

Again I looked at her and said nothing.

'Next time don't come to my room ok, and neither should all your refugee friends,' she said referring to all the black people working there.

The next evening I was on duty again and served the same woman. She looked at me only once

before poking me unexpectedly with her walking stick in my groin area.

'Didn't I tell you to stay away from me yesterday?' She said, visibly angry.

The unexpected attack made me drop the whole tray on the floor sending soup splashing all over the room.

'Serves you right,' Jenny cried, 'now you have to clean it all up, and right away!'

Somehow I kept my temper under check. I got a mop and bucket of water and cleaned up the mess.

Working in the old people's home was hard work, which required a good heart. What made it even harder was that I often genuinely wanted to help with all my heart, yet my efforts were seldom acknowledged. Sometimes, I would go into a room to help, and the occupant would simply look at me, making a snap judgement about whether I was to be trusted or not, before giving me their piece of mind.

Once, when only black workers were on duty, a man who had soiled himself refused to be attended to by any one of us, which had left him unattended for the whole night.

Once, I lost my temper when some younger woman had asked 'why the hell there were suddenly so many brown people around'. I had stormed out of her room and demanded she apologise before I could clean her room, as if she cared. She didn't apologise.

The duties required of a carer were diverse. One day I would work in the kitchen, another day in the laundry, a third day, directly with the old folk, helping them with their day-to-day chores. Working directly with the occupants was the duty I liked least, especially when dealing with people who were incontinent. Still, it was a job and the money was good.

A funny Zambian man we worked with said he liked it.

'Really, you like it?' I asked surprised someone could actually like such a job.

'Come on Boy, who in their right frame of mind would not cherish doing a BBC job?'

'BBC?' I asked.

'Yes, BBC', he answered, and burst out laughing.

'What's the connection between caring jobs and the BBC?' I had persisted, still at a loss.

'Of course it has everything to do with it. Use your medulla oblongata. You are the one with a medical degree.' He answered and again burst out laughing.

I tried hard to figure out the connection between caring jobs and the BBC. 'I don't get it. I can't think of what the British Broadcasting Corporation has to do with these kinds of jobs.

He laughed long and loud, uncontrollably.

'What's so funny?' I responded, clearly at a loss.

'Man, who is talking about the British Broadcasting Corporation?'

'Didn't you say BBC?' I asked, thinking I could have been thrown off by his deep accent.

'BBC, British Bum Cleaning,' he uttered, laughing his lungs out.

I had not found it funny at first, but later when I thought about it, I did. That was very creative of him.

Often a few of us, the Africans working at the care home, the largest in Aberdeen, would sit on a table in the staff room enumerating our academic achievements. MBChB, University of Zimbabwe, Bachelor of Accountancy, University of Malawi, Bachelor of Psychology, Makerere University,

Bachelor of Sociology University of Nairobi, Bachelor of Engineering, University of Accra.

It was interesting to realise how similar all our paths had been. We all had dreams, dreams within which merely alighting from a plane at Gatwick Airport was the gateway to prosperity, and not only for the dreamer but for whole communities back in Africa. During discussions with these colleagues, it became increasingly apparent that my long held dream could have been only that and nothing more. Just a dream - an illusion, mirage, a shadow with a shape but longevity.

'What do you mean?' Sekai had later asked, when I told her about old people's homes.

'I mean, when someone gets old, say like Mbuya, they put them into some place.'

'Like a boarding school?'

'Yes. A sort of old people's boarding house.' I had answered.

'A place where they put people go and die?'

I did not like the way she had phrased it but I said yes.

'What's wrong with your people?' she said, as if I suddenly owned the British.' Teach them to love,' she continued. 'Tell them in Africa we look after our elderly. They stay with us in the family and they die among us. We do not dump them in quarantine as if they are lepers.'

I knew she would not pass the opportunity to attack the British. She had never lost her wartime rhetoric even long after Zimbabwe got independent.

But in a way I felt she had a point. When I worked in the old people's home I looked at some of the loving old people and felt I could see through the nostalgia, the solitude, the desperation for family love. They spoke of families, of grandchildren, of loved ones and of everything that had meant so much to them before they were

packed into vans and dumped into a humongous building waiting for the inevitable, whenever this would come.

It was while I was working at the home that I received news about Mkoma.

Chapter 16. My Brother Mkoma

They killed him. All of them. Rose. Precious. Prudence. Pretty. Loveness. Patience. The Skinny Skeleton from Mufakose. And the rest of them. The arrogant young doctor who was attending to him said he had killed himself. Like a troublesome fox that had hid itself in too deep a hole to leap out.

‘If you forage for honey in beehives with no protective gear you should be prepared to be stung. Sweet things come at a price. Life has its own booby traps and the greedy and the reckless get caught. It is totally unacceptable that patients who have given nothing but respect for their own lives should be deprived of care while those who think with other parts of their anatomies other than their brains get a big chuck from our meagre resources. We have children in this hospital with malnutrition, kwashiorkor, marasmus, and all.

I had listened as the young doctor attending to my brother preached to his medical round team when I first arrived at the hospital where Mkoma had been admitted. The fact that I was within earshot and that the subject of his comments was my brother did not seem to deter him. All but one among his audience, an obese, sea-lion-waisted female nurse seemed to agree with him. The sea-lion-waisted nurse nodded her cucumber shaped head slowly and at regular intervals, sending a clear message to an onlooker that her mind was somewhere else. I observed viscous hair oil exude down her forehead like beads of sweat from a nervous boxer during a first ever bout. She wiped it off nonchalantly with the back of her sleeve. She had stared up at the ceiling for what was an unusually long period of time when my eyes followed hers. A giant brown spider was stalking a giant green housefly which had strayed into its territory. Within seconds the spider had seized its prey with the speed of a chameleon's tongue. The fly, still wriggling for freedom was soon half eaten.

I realised Mkoma was also watching the spider-fly scene when he screamed. His scream startled me. The sea-lion-waisted nurse walked towards him. I watched her draw a syringe from her pocket. A small white polythene envelope with three images of the sun; a rising sun, a midday sun, and a setting sun; painted on it dangled precariously from her pocket. Painkillers I supposed. Panadol or Aspirin. That's all the government could afford.

Where I now lived things were different. Medicines and health care were free. A friend in Aberdeen had brought his sister to Scotland who was started on antiretroviral therapy the moment she set her foot at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Antiretrovirals had made it possible for people to live with AIDS. 'Wonder drugs', my clinical pharmacology lecturer back in Aberdeen had said of them. This clinical pharmacology lecturer had made me prepare a series of presentations on HIV/AIDS for delivery to the other students. The other students would put it more into perspective if the topic was delivered by an African, he had said.

‘All young adults in Sub-Saharan Africa will be positive by the year 2020.’ the lecturer said one day. The other students had all stared at me as if the words ‘HIV Positive’ were written all over my body. I had stormed out the lecture room.

The news that Mkoma was seriously ill came when I was doing an afternoon shift at Margie’s Retirement Home. I received a call from Sekai. Mkoma was seriously ill in Mutare General Hospital.

‘What is it?’ I had wanted to know.

‘We don’t know Boy, but he has swollen lymph nodes, oral thrush, bedsores, and he has lost weight. He looks like a skeleton Boy, I tell you.’

Was that not what we had learnt in pharmacology? Swollen lymph nodes, oral thrush, bedsores, chronic diarrhoea, fever, weight loss. I bought two months supply of antiretroviral medicines. My pastor at the Baptist Church in King Street said his prayers and I was off to Africa.

Mkoma had showed no emotion at the news of my arrival. To his waning brain, I had always been there. Every morning he had told Mbuya of how he had seen me, attending to other patients in the ward and leaving him out, as if he had a plague.

'I saw him with my own eyes,' he was reported to have said. 'In his white coat.'

When I was told of these hallucinogenic episodes I cried. It was once an exuberant mind, but now clogged with despair and fear. He had loved me. In his world I was the hero who would change his world. According to him I had battled against a hostile environment and was about to score a compelling triumph.

'Victory is written all over his face,' Mkoma bragged to his friends just before I left for Scotland.

In Mkoma's world education was the ultimate victory. 'Money is power, power is mighty, but education is LIFE,' he would say.

‘A fulfilment of man’s dominion over nature,’ Clever would add.

‘Clever, tell you what my brother, one day you and I would kneel down and pay homage to this boy.’

‘Like the biblical Joseph and his brothers,’ Clever would add.

Such talk embarrassed me greatly, but it only seemed to fuel the sermons, especially when my brothers had had a few beers to drink. Mkoma even created his own parables about his heroic young brother who would one day feed an entire impoverished African village.

‘Boy, let me tell you something my little brother. I am not educated, but I know the meaning of education,’ began one of his sermons while we sat under the shade of our grass-thatched hut sipping the non-alcoholic home brew, *maheu*. ‘A sound education is like the village *Mutsamvu*, *Mutsamvu wekuchikomo* (The fig tree on the hill). During the fruiting season everyone stops by to

feed. Animals, birds and even tiny insects. The tree never fails, Boy. It continues to give, generously. Year after year it gives.' Mkoma would look solemn as he went through these episodes. Mbuya cried once when Mkoma concluded his sermon with how he had so much loved to go to school, but poverty had denied him the opportunity.

'I was by far the best student in my class but we did not have the means.' He had continued. 'In life, young man, it's more painful to have nothing than to be ill.' We want things to be different for you B. What ever you want to achieve in life Clever and I will do our best to get you there, right Clever?' Clever nodded, solemn and quiet as ever.

Being the oldest, Mkoma had been through tough times. He had paid dearly for being the eldest. He had started working in Umtali when he was only fifteen. With his meagre salary he helped Mbuya look after us. When I was a little boy I remember Mkoma coming home every holiday, Christmas, Easter, and Rhodes and Founders holidays. I remember vividly the brown half-oiled cardboard

boxes. Full. Two bars of perfection soap, two packets of 2kg sugar, one bag of Tanganda Tea, half a dozen loaves of Manica Bread, two 750ml bottles of Olivine cooking oil, and a packet of Crystal Sweets.

We would run at the sound of the bus screeching its brakes at our local bus stop, by the big Baobab tree. He would alight from the bus with an air of importance, always wearing a smile, more at his own importance than at us. I used to climb all over him, with my dusty feet and legs. On most occasions he would wear his polyester bellbottoms with amusingly high-heeled shoes for a man.

'Town shoes,' Mbuya said of those shoes, 'It's amazing what the white man can come up with.'

I had asked Mbuya why father Grey never wore such high-heeled shoes if it was the white man's ingeniousness to come up with such. She had rebuked me for such an ungodly question.

I had always considered it a privilege to have a brother like Mkoma. Unknown to me then were his inner feelings, his frustrations, unfulfilled

ambitions. Unfulfilled expectations like those of Pip in Dickens' 'Great Expectations'. As I grew older I saw through the emptiness. The void. The feelings of failure and resignation to fate. I saw the turning point. When he gave up the struggle against hope. The struggle against ambition. He abandoned hope like it was an unwanted wife and then he got married, to the brown bottle.

'I was baptised with Black Label,' he would brag after he had had few. 'And Castle Lager is my wife. I have no complains against her,' he would sing to his friends at Machipisa in his deep, croaky, hard-to-miss voice. He would smile at me and start his naming sessions.

'What about sticking to Joseph? Joseph Wiseman. Yes Boy, you are too intelligent for any other name,' Joseph Wiseman I would be for the next few days or so. Various other names such as Andrew Brainbox, James Cleverest or Petro Intelligencia would come and go. Joseph Wiseman (JW) still remained his favourite and during happier times Clever too would call me JW.

When sober Mkoma did not say much. He dropped his head down, often sandwiched between his knees, eyes fixed at one spot, looking at nothing in particular, as if tired of the mere concept of life. His mind would appear half shut like a cold blooded animal basking in the sun on a cold winter day.

I had not attended to Mkoma when he screamed. Even though he had called my name I had walked away. As if I was deaf. I walked out of the building and kept walking along a little corridor that led to a toilet. I did not need the toilet but I just found myself going there. The stench of stale urine and decaying human excreta pierced through my nostrils like an arrow through a soft plant.

'This is home,' my sixth sense reminded me.

I stood there motionless, like the imaginary rabbit trapped on the moon. Then I noticed the maggots on the toilet floor. They thronged the dark brown floors of the toilets in large congregations like swarms of bees.

'Damn it, forget about coming back to live in this country, I would rather live on cleaning old

folks' bottoms in Scotland than come back to this.' I said out loud and stormed out of the toilet.

I sensed someone staring at me as I walked past a hop poach of grieving women. I turned and saw a young woman smiling at me. I remembered her instantly.

Chapter 17. Mupi

The woman smiling at man was Mupi the girl in my class from high school. Mupi was the 'easy' girl in school. Every male student in school claimed they had 'learnt' things through her. I don't know how true this was, but jokes used to do the rounds that the day she would ever say no to anyone then someone in the school would die. I had openly derided her because of my 'Christian values'. At Scripture Union I preached vehemently against ‘people like her’ as if my very existence depended on her.

I remember how I had met her in the corridors one Sunday afternoon. She had asked if she could come with me to my reading room in the Physics lab, to study. There Mupi and I had ‘played’. She had made the comment that she had not expected a 'brother' to be so good in ‘these things’, which had mildly offended me.

Mupi had then bragged about the incident publicly in the school. It was rumoured that she had targeted me for a while before she eventually conquered me. She is said to have had a list of those she had considered her utmost conquests, those regarded as exemplary by the School Principal. I had not seen the list personally but my then girlfriend said that she had. She said my name was last but it was written in capitals. Not only was I her greatest conquest, but in conquering me she had also conquered the principal, and the headmaster. To them, I was the epitome of a good student; the example given to every misbehaving student; the yardstick laid down for those performing poorly in various subjects and the benchmark for those aspiring to do well academically.

Yet, the publishing of our 'little misdemeanour' greatly embarrassed me. My girlfriend was furious with me and requested that I confess at the Scripture Union, which I led, in front of everyone. I had convinced her that prayers were more powerful than confessions, which she had accepted. Together, we

had prayed vehemently that the great Satan, Mupi, would not cross my path again.

The great Satan did come near me again or rather I went near it, during the school holidays. I had stayed at school to study. Mupi had done the same, and so she and I found ourselves happily resuming what we had found to be an 'enhancement' to studying. After school had reopened, Mupi and I had continued with what we had both found mutually irresistible. We only stopped when we each went our separate ways upon leaving school.

'I wasn't too sure it was you. I heard you are in England.' Mupi said, with an exaggerated smile.

She appeared to be a more polished woman than those days back in high school. Long braids dangled generously behind her round head like unperturbed climbers in a tropical rain forest. A smooth skin dusted with exotic powders and a dark coloured Viscose dress matched by a pair of shapely long legs adorned this attractive African woman. I tried to smile back at her but could only manage a snarl.

'So, what brings you back from England?' She asked, not disguising her envy for the word 'England', or the fact that I lived there, or both; I just could not tell which.

'Scotland, not England,' I corrected.

'Scotland. Alright, what's the difference?' she said.

'They are different countries, with different people.' I was repeating what Graham had said to a drunken Kiwi girl who had referred to him as a 'silly English boy' in a pub in Glasgow.

'Same thing, what brings you back from SCOTLAND? If that makes you happier.'

'My brother, he has been admitted to this hospital.'

'Sorry to hear that. What is wrong with him?'

'I really don't know. They say it's *everything*.'

'Oh, that. It happens you know. Sometimes one gets struck by these strange illnesses and it feels like every single joint has been dislocated, every muscle like it has been pulled in a tag of war and every part of the body like it has been pounded in a mortar with a giant pestle.'

That was not an unusual belief. It was very common, especially among the older folk in the community. That a pain can 'move' around the whole body like a mole under ground. Once, when I was doing medical rounds as a medical student a well dressed middle-aged man walked into the outpatient department where I was training grimacing with pain.

'What is it? The attending doctor had asked.

'M*wiri wese*, every part of my body,' he had answered.

'Can you point precisely to where the pain is?

He moved fingers, pointing from head to toe, describing a pain that moved from the toes into feet, into the legs, then up into the abdomen via the hips, up the chest, up the neck into the head and back down the way it had come. It was not the first time anyone had heard of such mobile pain. I had on several occasions listened to patients describing strange pains, some which rolled around the body as if they were on wheels, others which galloped round the muscles like horses inside dark tunnels, others which gored the veins as if they had horns, whereas some just gnawed at bones as if they were termites.

'I guess the fact that this illness has brought you back home means that it's pretty bad' Mupi suggested.

'Yeah, it's pretty bad. I don't know if he will live.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, that's life I guess.' I remarked.

'Anyway, what is it that you do in England anyway?'

'Scotland.'

'Gees, what's the big deal? Scotland ok.'

'Reading, I have just finished my Masters Degree and I will be starting on my PhD when I get back, Doctor of Philosophy.'

'You never cease to amaze me. Instead of making money like others do in England you continue with your stupid books, as if people eat books'

'It's not stupid, Mupi.'

'Well, I hope one day you will bring those certificates to feed people,' she said rhetorically

I ignored the comment.

'Well, you have always been lucky with these things. Sometimes I wonder why luck always decent of the same people?’

Again I ignored it.

'What of you Mupi, what do you do for a living? You look well, I should admit.

'You know, things are tough in this country.'

'Indeed they are. I see the signs everywhere. So you are not in employment?'

'No, I am not.'

'It certainly doesn't show. So how are you keeping yourself so well, are you into buying and selling?'

'No, everyone is into this buying and selling. It’s a tough market.'

'I can imagine. Still, it's hard to imagine that you are just sitting at home, doing nothing.

'A beautiful woman like me never really sits at home. There are too many eyes out there with the ability to notice beauty.'

'What do you mean?' I queried.

'After all these years, you still acting bishop?'

'It does not matter what I act Mupi. But I pray I misunderstood you, you know people are dying.'

'And since when did you start stopping people from dying?'

'I don't stop people from dying Mupi, but this disease is real. One has to take care.'

'*Ibva*, bugger off, you didn't go to England to come and lecture to us on how we should lead our lives. It's only a mind resting on a full stomach that thinks the way you do. People in England do not

have empty stomachs, and therefore they think of being careful first. People here in Africa have empty stomachs and they think of food before thinking of being careful. I thought you educated lot would understand this better.'

'AIDS kills, Mupi, full stomach or empty stomach.'

'*Hehe*, *Seka zvako Muu*,' she faked a laugh, 'who would have thought after all these years, you would still come back the preacher. Please do us a favour and go preach in England.'

'Scotland.'

'Whatever.'

'Mupi … ' I'd tried to argue but she'd cut me short.

'Dr. Boy,' she said ridiculing, 'this is a free world. Everyone has a right to live as they want. That includes you living in England. That also

includes me doing as I please with my body. Sure, AIDS does kill, but also does hunger.'

Her lips quivered angrily as she ranted. I could almost feel her anger as little droplets of spittle flew into the heated midday air and landed harmlessly onto my face. My eyes rested on her red lips for a moment. Red lips on a black woman. For some reason this looked odd. It was as if I had never seen a black woman with lipstick before.

I lost the strength to argue. I just felt sorry for her and her society, for her generation. Could she have been more wrong? AIDS had flown me home from Scotland. It was as real as the palm of one's hand, as true as one's own shadow. It stood there, mocking menacingly at anyone who dared flout its rules and regulations. The thought of my brother lying dying inside the very building in front of where we stood arguing, made me shudder. If only she knew. Her beautiful full face would wither like that of him who lay faltering inside, her long hair fall apart in single strands like the autumn leaves of

the giant Baobab and her body would shrivel like a plant whose roots have been severed by termites.

Exhaustion was catching up with me as I stood and sweated in the sun. I asked Mupi to excuse me and ambled to a cluster of wooden benches at the rear of the hospital. Women stood and sat everywhere. The fat, plumb, skinny, young, old, quiet and loud mingled noisily as if they were a swarm of hungry quelea birds. Their faces told of assortments of stories. These stories could be read off as clearly as large white prints on a blackboard. Scorch-cracked lips, brittle kinky hair, one or two patches on a dress, cracked dry feet, spoke of hard, lean times wherever they had come from. The dust that had been puffed up by the twenty-kilometres-per-hour chicken buses that plied the routes between Mutare and various villages clung vividly to their hair and eyelids.

What a different world this was to Scotland. Still, Scotland was not home to me and I knew it would never be. Even Graham never considered that I could ever be. When I went along to support

Scotland playing at Hamden Park, Graham had always considered it a favour to him.

I felt a mild headache. It could have been due to the heat. The sun had just manoeuvred itself into a position directly over our heads. I remembered it would be about time to go home during my days as a herd boy in the village.

Pools of imaginary deep blue water bopped, danced and flickered a short distance away from where I stood.

'It's called mirage,' My 'A' level physics teacher once said. The topic that day was 'the Doppler Effect.'

'Why would people spend time studying such?' Mbuya had ridiculed after I had told her about the Doppler Effect.

'They earn a living from studying such,' I informed her.

'Here in the village if you spend your time watching the sun's rays dance on dust, then you will starve.'

I had laughed. Not at what Mbuya had said *per se* but it reminded me of Mr Biswas in VS Naipaul's 'A House for Mr Biswas.'

“Those who do not work shall not eat,” Mr Biswas had been warned after refusing to work.

“How could he who does not eat, work?” Mr Biswas had shot back at his adversary. I used to recite these lines to Mbuya after I read the book. She had found the whole story of Mr. Biswas sad.

'Actually, your brother looks much better today Babamunini.’ A familiar voice disrupted my thoughts.

I turned round and looked in the direction the voice had come from.

Chapter 18. The Little Husband

It was my sister-in-law, talking about her husband.

The first thing I saw was her shapeless shadow, motionless, stationary, like a shadow from scarecrow hastily put together. I wondered how someone's shapelessness could be so vividly depicted in her shadow. A small dumbbell shaped head, with out of proportion erect ears sticking out like two stray darts on an overused dartboard; a short, chubby neck that sagged into an equally chubby body, as if she permanently carried an invisible overload and a visibly sagging belly that hung sideways like a pregnant swine –defined my sister-in-law.

I yawned widely like a hippo, emphasizing my exhaustion. I did not bother to cup my hands to cover my mouth. From the copious sweat erupting from my sister-in-law's forehead she had either been

standing in the sun for too long or she had been munching at something laborious, like sugarcane. This woman enjoyed food. Like an herbivore, always munching at something, anything, as if she chewed the cud. I mumbled something back to her, hardly audible even to myself. She had continued talking but all I could hear was her voice, not the words. Her voice sounded alien and unreal. Like those recorded voices that tell you to mind the gap in London underground train stations; repetitive, monotonous, unhuman.

My sister-in-law was one woman who found doing anything to be rather a puzzle. A woman who could not hold a baby properly, could not wash her own body properly, and could not even cook for her own self.

'The only thing my wife can do with ease is fall pregnant,' my brother had once said angrily, after his wife had prepared bad *sadza* for him and his booze friends.

This woman would sit by the fire when it was cold, lie under the shade when it was hot and sit in the hut when it was neither hot nor cold. She complained most of the time about her caesarean section scars, which were by then two years old. These scars seemed to hurt more when there was work to be done. Yet, she would not stop smiling when there was good food to be had on the day. During one of his angry episodes, Mkoma -- despite the presence of Mbuya and us all -- had said that this woman could not even move her body during intimate moments.

I wondered what my brother had found attractive about this woman. But then it just seemed that Mkoma had this propensity for marrying odd women. Before this woman came, was Mai D, a woman blessed with the stature of a hippo, the skin of an elephant and the stamina of a stallion. On a few occasions I had watched in awe as she opened a bottle of coca cola with her teeth as if she was peeling bananas.

Unlike Shapeless Shadow, Mai D was round with huge bulging buttocks that were as solid as a rock and as large as a small anthill. Mai D was very dark in complexion. She said her classmates in primary school nicknamed her Wankie but she had no clue why. Sekai said it was the coal. Coal was mined in abundance at a town called Wankie.

When Mkoma married Mai D and brought her home, Mai D and I slept on one part of Mbuya's hut while Mbuya slept on her usual sport. Mai D and I slept where Clever and Misfortune used to sleep, while Mbuya had kept her old spot.

Before we fell asleep Mai D and I used to talk. We would talk about life in the village, about my school adventures, the happenings at the herding place and about village women's gossip, as well as about family.

After my trip to Harare, her favourite topic became her husband.

'So, does your brother have many women?' Mai D asked one night. Mbuya slept at a funeral that night.

'He doesn't have any,' I uttered, imaging the sort of answer that Mkoma would approve.

'Good, honest boys don't lie.'

'I swear I saw none.'

'Every real man needs someone, a woman regularly -- do you remember me explaining this to you?'

'Yes, I remember.'

'Did you believe me?'

'Yes'

'I thought you did. So, you suggesting to me that your brother is not a real man?' He hardly comes home to me.'

I hesitated. 'Sometimes some women come,' I offered 'to cook,' I added quickly, trying to clean up what I shouldn't have said.

'You know I am not talking about cooking.'

‘So, are you going to tell Mkoma that I told you some women come to the house?’

‘No.’

'You are not angry with Mkoma that some women came to the house?'

‘No.’

‘Why? Why are you not angry?’

‘Because I have my other husband here, -- my little husband,' She said and giggled.

'Can you tell me why men always need women?' I queried.

'You will understand some day,' she answered and giggled again. I did not understand why she was giggling like a ticklish little girl.

‘I want to know now.’

'You are far too young to understand,' she said and made me feel like I was suddenly five years old again.

This made me retort defensively. 'I am not young anymore. I am a big boy now. All my friends at school say so.'

She laughed.

'Big boys don't say -- they show.'

'How?' I questioned.

She giggled again 'It shows, you know. We adults have a way of telling.

'All the boys I play with say that I have grown up now.' I answered defensively.

Mai D giggled even more. I had never seen her behave like that before.

'Come then, let me see for myself,' she said, extending her hand towards me.

My body tensed, cold like a frozen iceman. After I weaned myself from being bathed, Mbuya said no one should touch me there.

Mai D's hand strayed and stayed there. It made me very uncomfortable.

Her hand was surprising soft for such a big woman.

'You are becoming a really big boy?' she said in a changed voice, whispering as if she was afraid of being heard. I did not get why she had to whisper.

Her breathing also changed. It became heavy and irregular, as if she was having sporadic

asthmatic attacks. Her left hand stayed, probing for 'lost jewellery' while her right hand lifted me effortlessly and put me where she wanted me. Again I was a ‘big boy’. I showed very little resistance but my whole body was stiff and my heart pounded with apprehension.

'Still a little baby,' she said, her voice portraying hidden frustration, 'Give me your hand,' she said, and grabbed my little shaking hand. She tugged it away from me impatiently and put it where she wanted it.

My heart missed a beat when I realised where my hand rested. Her huge heart pounded as if it would blow my brain out of my skull.

'You are not scared like a little boy are you?' She asked in a girly whispering voice, hardly audible.

'I am not afraid,' I lied, my voice pleading, half-incriminating.

Unperturbed by my pleading voice Mai D seemed satisfied with my answer and continued.

'You are still a little boy.' she announced suddenly, frustrated at something I had done or hadn't done.

She pulled my hand, having lost all sense of gentleness and inhibition, and pressed it harder where she wanted it. Still, I made no attempt to resist. I simply lay there, like a lamb ready to be sacrificed.

I was scared, mostly of what Mbuya would say if she found out. I was a little sinner who would be chaperoned to hell when the day of reckoning came, with Satan's angels with their red hot folks and shovels waiting ceremoniously to turn and toast me around the intense flames of hell. I would burn eternally and would never see those whom I loved. I had not obeyed. I thought of the song `*Trust and Obey*' which Mbuya had taught me in both English and Shona.

Kuteerera

Ndiyo basi nzira

Kufara kuna Jesu

Asi kuteerera

Trust and obey

For there is not other way

To be happy in Jesus

But to trust and obey

Chapter 19 - Sarura Wako

With Maiguru still chattering like a monkey, I sauntered down the narrow, dusty, litter-infested concrete stairs that led to half a dozen or so untreated Eucalyptus benches, cracking from the overpowering heat and age. I sat down on one of the benches. Maiguru followed, still talking none stop. She even attempted her usual lame jokes; as if we were all gathered there for pleasure. My eyes wandered and realised that a number of women from our village had arrived.

Everyone seemed pleased to see me.

'We want Fanta *babamunini?*' they chorused soon after the greetings. The greetings that ask about everyone else's state of health. 'How are your children? And their friends? How is your uncle, the one who fell from the Baobab tree? I am so sorry to hear about the death of your nephew's friend,' and on and on.

I bought them the Fanta.

They spoke at the top of their voices and laughed noisily.

'How can we have Fanta without something?' the village gormandiser asked.

'Mabiskitsi,' a cockroach faced gluttony suggested, ‘We want biscuits.’

I bought them bread. It was cheaper and more filling than biscuits. Soon they wanted more, someone said *mathings*, another said *machips,* those in small plastic packets written 'Willards' all over them. Sekai said I should tell them I had no money. Money did not grown on trees even in Scotland. But how could I? How could someone so well-educated and coming from a land of milk and honey have no money? I bought them each a packet of Maputi, a crude type of white maize snack, popped and heavily salted. Maputi were cheaper and also very filling.

Everyone wanted to go into the ward to see Mkoma at the same time when visiting time arrived, all twenty-three of them. Sekai was mad that so many had come. Among them were the *varoyi,* the witches, bent on hastening Mkoma's impending departure.

'Four visitors per patient at any one time please,' a tired looking Sea-Lion-Waisted crowed like a distant pied crow.

They took turns: a group of three would go in, stay for a couple of minutes and then leave to give the others a chance. I stayed inside all the time as Mkoma had wanted me to.

All the time Mkoma looked tired and afraid. It was fear of the inevitable.

'I had refused to accept the job promotion,' he said, 'but the family, everyone, coerced me into accepting it.' Tears trickled down his emaciated face reminding me that there was still life within that talking skeleton of a man.

'Now look where it has taken me to Boy. It has led me to my grave. He talked and looked like a child, a starved child, similar to those shown on the big news channels whenever there is famine in this or that part of Africa. They always seem to pick the right photograph. The photograph that captures the hearts and souls of people. In his state, Mkoma would have made the grade with ease. He could have appeared as the lead picture on CNN, BBC World Service, SKY News or Euro News, followed by appropriate headlines. His wilting skin looked as though it harboured a corrosive substance beneath it. His collar bones stuck out like the legs of a preying mantis, while his cheekbones threatened to pierce through what was left of his emaciated skin. His eyes sagged as if they were embedded in a bloodless skull from a horror movie. His attempt to speak was incoherent, with the constant low-level moans making it near impossible to understand him. And all around him the scene was replicated again and again, like it was a scene from hell.

I had heard the story of the job promotion before – it was said that Mkoma's woes had been inflicted

by a workmate who had been jealous of a job promotion Mkoma had received. It appeared that those same culprits who had given themselves the licence to feast on my brother Misfortune those years back had also issued themselves a second licence to feed off our family again.

The entrance of another trio had halted the discussions. One of the women who had just walked in was an aunt whom we nicknamed Night Rider. She was one of the sorts of aunties we have by virtue of them living in a house down the road. Mkoma was visibly shaken by the presence of this woman. His body visibly tensed and his eyes closed as if the mere presence of the woman had drawn the last breath out of him.

'*Vemakore*, Long time' Night Rider greeted me.

'Eee, aunt, how do you do?'

'We are well, my child. How are the others, where you have come from?'

'They are well, how is Royai and the rest of your children?'

'They are well! Royai got married a while ago. She has five children now.'

'Congratulations, that is good news indeed.' I said wondering who on earth could have married that ugly, foul-mouthed girl with a scorched face and brown teeth.

Royai was about my age. When we were little we used to spend much time together, guarding the gardens from goats or fending away the marauding baboons from the maize fields. One day, whilst we were watching the maize fields she had told me their greatest family secret.

'How many hyenas do you people have?' she had asked, innocently.

'Hyenas? What do you mean,' I asked with both the innocence and the curiosity of a child.

'Yes, hyenas. Do you not have any?'

'No, you have hyenas?' I asked fascinated and scared at the same time.

'Yes, one for each member of our family, we ride them at night, only at night.

Mother said we should never ever mention this to anyone, but I am telling you as a friend. We are friends Boy, right?'

'Right'.

'How come you people have no hyenas?' Many families in the village have.' She had mentioned a number of families in the village who secretly had hyenas as pets.

'So, where do you ride these hyenas to?' I had questioned.

'Sometimes to places far away, and sometimes to graveyards.'

That frightened me. 'To do what at graveyards?' I had queried.

'I don't know -- but we all wait while mother and her friends do things. Sometimes mother even rides on owls, if she wants to go far.'

'An owl?' I repeated, getting even more fascinated.

'Yes, you heard me, silly.'

'An owl is too small for a person to ride on.'

'There are big ones, very big owls with large scary eyes. Mother does not allow us children to ride on them'

I had told Mbuya about the story. She gave me, in turn, a strong warning not to open my mouth to anyone about this. I hadn't but Sekai, who was never one to lose such a newsworthy opportunity, had told the story to the whole village. It had caused

pandemonium in the village. Sekai and her friends had refused to play with a girl their age from Royai's family. It was them who nicknamed Royai's mother 'Night Rider'. Night Rider had come to Mbuya fuming. Mbuya had apologised and played it down as children's talk. Night Rider would have none of it. She accused me of having made up the story and demanded that Mbuya flog me in her presence. Mbuya refused and asked her to do it herself is she dared. Night Rider had stormed out of our hut promising that Mbuya 'would see'.

A couple of days later Mbuya had complained of a severe headache. She was visibly shaken and probably feared that she 'was seeing' as promised. She prayed for longer hours than usual and mumbled her words, as if she did not want us children to hear what she was saying. A few weeks later Misfortune had died.

History often repeats itself. Mkoma who worked at a clothing factory in Harare with Night Rider's son had been promoted to be a factory supervisor. Mkoma said Night Rider's son had been so upset

with Mkoma's promotion that he had promised him that he 'would see'. I think Night Rider's son had found the job for Mkoma in the first place and he felt aggrieved that he had been promoted ahead of him. Mkoma had conferred with the family before the promotion. Mbuya had thought it a blessing from God to be selected for promotion among so many and praised God for it.

Mkoma looked at me, as if seeking divine intervention. 'Get up and walk,' he seemed to anticipate these words from me from the very moment I had arrived. I felt helpless. Even the famed antiretroviral therapy, bought with my hard earned money in Aberdeen, could not save my brother. When he began to realise the futility of it all Mkoma said he was just happy that I had come home. He was just grateful that I could come at all. He wanted to see his little brother for the last time.

It did not take long before the end came. We all knew it was coming but still it hurt. I had loved my brother. We had all loved him. I wished human

beings were like cars. They die and you send them to the garage to get fixed.

A day after Mkoma's burial, our male cousins, nephews, Clever and I sat on the ground in front of Mbuya's new brick house, forming a circle. The scene resembled the game of '*Sarura Wako Kadeya Deya Nendoro Chena'*, which we used to play when we were children. In the game, we would sit down on the ground, forming a circle. One person would sing and dance inside the circle, preparing to choose a mock suitor for himself or herself.

Sarura wako,
Kadeya deya nendoro chena,
Wangu mutsvuku,
Kadeya deya nendoro chena,
Haazori ambi,
Kadeya deya nendoro chena.

To make the game exciting, the dancer would take his or her time, teasing, giving hope to those who wanted to get picked by that particular dancer, worrying those who did not want to be picked and

fascinating those who sat on the edge. In the end, the dancer would settle on someone, and the two would dance together at the middle of the circle.

On the day in question, the stakes were higher. It was neither a game nor children's play. Maiguru stood inside the circle, a dish of water wobbling precariously in her unstable chubby hands. She looked more confused than I had ever seen her before.

Our cousins, nephews, Clever and I, sat still, waiting for Maiguru to make her move. A couple of my nephews sitting to my left fidgeted, trying to attract her attention. A seventy something year-old cousin who sat across from where I sat wore a huge smile on his face. Clever sat motionless and blank, as if his face was that of a snowman – a rigid black snowman.

I looked down, praying that the dish would pass. Maiguru took her time, walking around the circle, pretending she was finding it difficult to make a choice. After what seemed like a century the game

was over, she walked towards her target, stopping briefly in front of Old Cousin, then in front of blank Clever and then eventually laid down the dish of water in front of her chosen new husband, the doctor.

She sat down behind her dish of water and started crying. I knew it was taboo to refuse the dish once it had been offered to you. The legacy of inheritance was an integral part of our culture and it had to live on. I sighed, loudly. Beads of sweat sprouted on my forehead as if they were wild seeds on soft ground after the first rains. I knew what was expected of me; wash my hands in the dish of water to indicate that I had accepted my late brother's wife as my own. I shuddered because of family and village expectations that as the new husband I should continue to perform marital duties to a young 'healthy' woman in her prime.

I looked at Clever, just as I had done way back in those years when I was in Grade 1, seeking his intervention. He nodded slightly, indicating that I should accept this responsibility. The woman sat

still in front of me, waiting for me to make a move. I wanted to tell her to get lost, to pack her bags and go, somewhere, anywhere, back where she came from. Her husband was dead so what else did she want from me, from our family. But deep down in my inner self I knew I could not say that. She was in the family and she was our responsibility. These were the dictates, the norms of my people. Everyone was watching the scene with special interest. They wanted to see what the evils of Western society had done to a once sensible, promising young man.

'But you know I do not live here anymore Maiguru' I whispered to Maiguru.

She just stared at me, as if she had no ears.

I repeated the statement, to Clever.

'She has chosen you,' he answered, sharply. 'She is your brother's wife. You know you can't refuse.'

The other men in the circle looked on in amazement. How could I refuse a free wife, one for whom *lobola,* dowry, had been fully paid. I knew some men in the circle were salivating. I wished one of them would get up, grab this woman and disappear with her for ever. I wished everyone looking at the unfolding drama could understand. But they didn't. They only looked on in amazement, as if education makes a person insane.

That's how they had looked when I tried telling them that they should boil the water they drank.

'Why?' they had queried.

'Because it's not safe to drink water from the river without boiling it.'

They had all looked at me in utter astonishment.

'You grew up here and drank this water all your life. Why do you think we should boil it now?'

I’d had no answer. It was just the right thing to do, to boil untreated water.

I stood up and went behind Mbuya's new house. One of the several aunties, who like everyone else, was watching the scene with intense interest followed.

'Are you trying to embarrass this whole family?' She insinuated.

'No aunt, but how can I look after Maiguru when I am so far away from home' I tried a logical explanation – one which I thought would be accepted.

'It does not matter. In the old days men used to go and work in mines in Johannesburg, for years. Women are very strong creatures. They wait. Even when the men never come back, women have still waited.'

'Aunt, I am not even married yet, how will I find my own wife if you people give me Maiguru?'

'You are not the first one Boy, you know it happens all the time, this is now your wife, your brother paid lobola for her, so we can't just waste her, Boy, we can't allow that to happen.'

The group of men in the circle stayed put, hoping Maiguru would change her mind and choose them instead. I prayed she would, but deep inside myself I knew she wouldn't. She stayed still, tears flowing extravagantly down her puffy, dry cheeks.

'You have to accept this,' Clever said, 'Otherwise we will be the laughing stock of this entire village.'

I looked at him disapprovingly, and then walked back to where Maiguru sat. I squatted in front of her and her dish and I washed my hands in it.

Chapter 20: The TK Hotel

My flight back to Scotland was early the next morning. Even though I had relatives in Harare I had chosen to stay at a small hotel in the Avenues. I paid the equivalent of twelve British Pounds for the room -- an arm and a leg for locals. It was a decent hotel by the country's standards. After I checked in, I stayed in my room and tried to read, but my mind was not in it. It refused to work. I grabbed the remote control for the small fourteen inch television set sitting on a small, over-polished mahogany table. There was nothing worth watching on the 'medieval', lower than sub-standard local channel. It was frustrating. 'It is better not to have a television station at all,' I said loudly.

'Nothing is better than this joke they call ZBC.' I thought aloud. 'Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. What Broadcasting Corporation? Zimbabwe Boring Corporation sounds more appropriate.'

A thirty-something-year old black and white movie was showing with no sound. The loud hissing sound from the monitor indicated that there was nothing wrong with the ageing television set. The culprit had to be the broadcaster.

I picked up a copy of the Herald Newspaper which I had bought that morning but hadn't had enough energy to read. Lately the Herald had been filled with trivial, shallow, substandard stories. Back in the mid 80s, when senior politicians abused a scheme to buy Toyota Cressidas, (yes, Toyoda Cressidas), it was the Herald which had broken the story. During that era, readers queued for long winding queues on the streets of Harare to get their hands on a copy of the Herald. Now, the Herald was a paper which reported gossip such as who was sleeping with whose wife, who had stolen whose goat in a village in Watsomba, as well as which cabinet comrade danced the most at a party rally in Uzumba Marambapfungwe.

I don't know why I had bought a copy of the Herald that morning but I had. I browsed through

the pages, not reading, not looking for anything in particular. Like we used to do when we were little, perusing old magazines without the slightest notion that the text meant something. Before we started perusing we would break into two groups. Each group would choose a side of the book, left or right. We would then open the magazine, noting who had the most prized possessions as depicted by pictures: a car on the left, a house on the right; a wedding dress on the left, food on the right.

In the entertainment section of the Herald, I quickly discovered that the local music maestro, Oliver Mtukudzi, was playing at the TK Hotel, not too far from where I was staying. I liked Mtukudzi; most Zimbabweans did, so I decided to go. I took a quick shower, slipped into my favourite Nike track suits, bought at a bargain price at T.J. Maxx Store on Bedford Road in Aberdeen, and prepared to walk across the street to the TK.

I put on a large Adidas coat that I had bought from a second hand shop in Union Street in Aberdeen. The heavy coat was more for

convenience than due to the weather. The uncomfortable, massive blue coat had as many pockets as the colours of biblical Joseph's coat. I needed the pockets to carry money. To buy enough drinks for an evening I needed an amount of notes that could fill an average size supermarket plastic bag. The largest bank note in the country was one thousand dollars. Thirty of these would not buy a 300ml bottle of Coca Cola. What made my predicament worse that day was that when I changed the one hundred British pounds I had on the black market, the dealer only had five hundred dollar bills. With the exchange rate being two hundred thousand Zimbabwe dollars to one British pound, it meant I was given twenty thousand bank notes. Quite a load, even if one had a small truck for the occasion.

I fished for a bunch of notes from the black bag that I had bought for the purpose, like a losing scrabbles player fishing for lucky letters. I did not count the money. Who did those days? Those resilient enough to have remained in the country could tell the amount by merely looking at the

bundles of the useless paper. 'Yes, useless paper indeed', an old acquaintance had concurred when I referred to the money in that way.

'Look at it this way cousin,' he had announced. (We were not cousins. It was just another way of saying 'mate'.)

'A realm of toilet paper costs eighty thousand dollars, right?'

'Right', I said.

'And five hundred dollar notes are the most common bills in circulation, right?'

'Right', I answered, not too sure where this was leading.

'So, mathematically, if one wanted to buy a roll of toilet paper with five hundred dollar bills he would need one hundred and sixty bills?' He said, getting excited with wherever this was headed.

'Yes', I pronounced, after doing the mental arithmetic.

'From one roll of tissue paper, do you think one hundred and sixty wipes are possible?'

I did the Maths. If one lived alone, each roll of toilet paper would last about two weeks. If one empties his bowels once every day and assuming that he wipes four times to achieve utmost cleanliness that would mean approximately fifty six wipes from one realm of toilet paper.

'Nope, it's not possible,' I stated, and looked at him as if I could see inside his perverted mind.

'See, see, cousin,' he said excitedly 'it's more economical to use five hundred dollar bills for wiping one's ass than to buy toilet paper!' He proceeded to laugh heartily at his own witticism. 'Stroke of genius!' he exclaimed, more to himself than to me. I didn't laugh. It sounded too true to be a joke, like a joke made by a cripple about his own

disability. One never feels comfortable laughing at such jokes.

I walked awkwardly towards the TK Hotel, each and every one of my pockets packed with low quality bank notes. With such low quality notes I wondered why counterfeiters did not come in and have a party. Almost immediately, I had an answer to the question: simple, they would pay more for the paper than the value of the bills that they would counterfeit. So, economically it made no sense.

I wondered what had gone wrong within my country. As if I didn't know! Such a question was similar to the thoughts of a thief who stills, gets arrested, goes to jail, and then wonders what he had done wrong to deserve such treatment.

The situation in the country had spiralled out of control. The previous day, I had wandered through the suburbs of Harare trying to get some sugar for Mbuya back in the village. Mbuya was one of those women who had headaches if she did not have an early morning cup of tea. Lately sugar had been

scarce. 'It was more difficult to find sugar than a pangolin,' my Tissue Paper story acquaintance had said. I even tried the well connected, few connections I had left in the country but they said they had long resorted to sadza for breakfast, forgetting about tea. There was simply no grain of sugar in the country, like Uganda during the reign of Idi Amin, like The Democratic Republic of Congo during Mobutu Sese Seko's reign. Why is it that when a country is in trouble sugar is the first commodity to run out?

Before I started the sugar hunt I had worried about where to put the sugar if I were to find it. The trunk of the reconditioned Nissan Sunny that I had borrowed from a friend was full -- of money. It contained a bigger volume of money than the volume of sugar that it would buy. Using some of the money to buy the thirty litres of petrol I bought behind bushes in Budiriro High Density Suburb had generated some space inside the trunk.

Buying fuel from behind bushes had at first appeared odd, but a friend told me to be real. This

was not Scotland or the Zimbabwe that I had left behind. This was a new Zimbabwe. An African country. Buying fuel from behind bushes and backyards was not out of the norm in a country rapidly accelerating backwards towards the medieval ages. Petrol stations had been dry for months; no foreign currency; and the few cars than trickled along the streets of Harare like iron wheeled wooden carts in medieval Europe secured fuel through this backyard system. Senior comrades in the government ran the bush fuel syndicates, and made more money than Rio Tinto the gold miner.

Before we started negotiating for the fuel, the young man selling the commodity had a long stare at me as if to gauge my 'value', like I was the one on sale. And then he said his price. There was no set price. The seller would mention whatever amount he wanted and the buyer would take it, or leave it. It was not a supply and demand situation. It was demand and demand.

'Two hundred thousand dollars per litre *bigaz*.' The shabby looking young man, in intrinsic need of

a bath, said. His skin had vivid scales like a cobra about to shade its skin. He looked like one of the battalions of street kids who had taken over the streets of Harare before the cabinet comrades came with their heavy sticks and beat the hell out of them. Before they got shown the stick, the Street Kids had appropriated every part of the city: First Street, Second Street, Jason Moyo, Julius Nyerere Way, and Nelson Mandela. These kids -- some old -- were cunning, and even intimidating.

If one treated these Street Kids like human beings, with no fear, they would be ready to do business with you; honest, straightforward business. If one treated them like vagrants, the dirty thugs which they actually were, then they would give you a raw deal, con you, swindle you, steal from you, physically manhandle you if need be. There were stories of prominent people who had been sold fuel mixed with urine, or those who had simply been told to 'bugger off', *shaikwa*, after paying their money. Blatantly, just like that.

In the city centre these Street Kids were kings in their own right, city barons, who each owned stretches of streets and roads. It was these barons who decided who parked where and who didn't. It was them who decided whose car should be broken into and whose shouldn't, a law unto themselves. If they succeeded in swindling someone of valuables, then they had a meal for a day. If they failed and got arrested, they had nothing to lose. After all, there is safety in numbers; there were battalions of them patrolling the streets of Harare. If one was arrested it wouldn't make a difference. It was like removing a spec of sand from the beach after one got into your eyes.

'I will take all the fuel that you have *yanga*,' I said to Scaly Skin, looking at him straight in the eyes, exhibiting self-confidence. Scaly Skin's friends marched about like presidential guard soldiers during civil unrest, making sure all was well.

He took an improvised funnel made from a 750ml Mazoe Orange crush plastic container and

asked me to hold it to the mouth of the fuel tank while he lifted first the ten litres and then the twenty litre containers like they were small bottles of water. The palms of his hands were as black and hard as my car tires. He took his time, making sure he did not spill a single drop of the precious liquid. I scrutinized the fuel for any signs of dilution. It looked genuine. I paid him his dues. I just pulled out a number of plastics bags with five hundred dollar bills from the trunk of my car and gave it to him. He didn't count the money. He simply looked at me again, seemed contented that I was the honest type, nodded his satisfaction and waved me goodbye.

I nodded back at him, without saying a word, pulled another plastic bag of money and threw it at him. He caught it, like an agile Rugby player and shouted his gratitude. I got into my Nissan and continued with my quest to find sugar for my grandmother. In the end, I gave up and send a message to that effect.

Going to the TK was going to help me to forget the events of the previous few days. Listening to *Gondo*, *Kusekana Kwaanakamba*, *Wasakara*, *Todii*, and the rest of Oliver Mtukudzi's songs live, would make me feel revitalised.

I was an early bird at The TK so it was easy to find a place to sit. I sat alone on one of the hidden corners on the 2nd street side of the hotel garden. I moved all the chairs from my proximity to dissuade company. I just did not feel like having company. A talkative elderly waiter with a deep Manyika accent came and served me a coke. He started a conversation about how better our dear Oliver had gotten since the days of '*Psss Hello*', '*Chirimupoto*' and '*Gurwe*'. I nodded my agreement. Oliver Mtukudzi had indeed matured with age, like wine.

I had tried to throw in one or two comments into the conversation about the state of things in the country and not surprisingly the old man disappeared. For good reasons, the people in this traumatised country were careful with strangers. One did not really know who belonged to the 'dark

glasses' club and who didn't. Those who said the wrong things in the wrong places were known to have disappeared with no trace.

The TK Hotel had become a hive of activity soon after Oliver Mtukudzi and his Black Spirits band arrived. Killer Ants roamed the place with so much confidence and enthusiasm that one would be forgiven to think they owned the place. They came in droves, all kinds, types and age groups. Some chose to set their traps on the street, standing in strategic positions and making sure they displayed whatever worked as clear advantage over competitors. Those who were pretty and attractive stood in well lit areas making sure potential clients saw clearly how appealingly pretty they were; the older and regular ones made sure they used their assertiveness and confidence to corner the new, timid clients unacquainted with the rules of the game. Those with huge behinds made a point of going onto the stage to wiggle their butts to capture the attention of the butt crazy African men whose philosophy seemed to be 'the larger the better'. Even those who had been brainwashed by the West to

prefer the slim and tall women were made to rethink their allegiances when exposed to the buttwagging show.

The young and nervous women sat in dark corners, praying that those clients looking for the uninitiated would go and fish them out. A girl in this last category came to where I was sitting. She dragged a chair and sat so close to me that my knees were literally brushing against her butt. I couldn't move backwards as my chair was already on the back wall. It made me uncomfortable, but it was a public place, with a live music band playing for goodness sake. Everyone had a right to choose to sit where it was they wanted to.

After a few minutes of sitting in this awkward position, the woman turned round and said hello, a blunt 'hello'. Like it was a simple greeting from a stranger's wife whom you have accidentally bumped into. A simple greeting to acknowledge the presence of another human being. Like a dog waggling its tails to acknowledge the presence of another dog.

I helloed her back, and kept quiet.

'Can I offer you a drink?' I asked after I observed her ogling at my drink like a three-year old would at a stranger's ice cream, when mom has told her she has no money.

She raised her eyes, looked at me and declined, politely. I could not map out her features in the semi-darkness but she had a long Somali looking face. Long, with a pointed nose. Not our usual flat noses. She also had a huge dimple on her upper lip, as if she was a niece of President Robert Mugabe.

I was not too convinced that her refusal to accept a drink from me was genuine. I was born in the same society and I knew the culture. One just does not accept an offer of food at the first time of asking. It is considered bad manners. Even if you have not eaten for forty days and forty nights if you walk into someone's house and they offer you food, good manners dictate that you decline at the first time of asking. Culturally, it is also bad manners to make such an offer once. The one who is offering

would have to ask three or more times to ascertain the genuineness of the decline.

I remembered a long time back, when I was little when a stranger came into our hut while we were having dinner; sadza and chicken. Father Grey had been invited home for dinner that evening and chicken had to be found for the distinguished guest.

'Please wash your hands and join the meal,' Mbuya had asked the stranger.

'I am not really hungry, I ate just before I left where I came from,' he answered, his lips white as chalk and dry as dust. He was obviously either, very hungry, thirty or both. We could all see that. He even looked weak, like he had not eaten for a long time.

'No, no, no, please *gurai musuwa wesadza, munonge nhindi yenyama*, have a small amount of sadza and a piece of meat. We really can't eat while you watch us.'

Again he refused. After some persuasion the man washed his hands and joined us the children. We all ate from one plate, meticulously breaking the sadza one after the other, soaking it in the chicken soup and enthusiastically placing it in the mouth. It was not often that chicken was on the menu. So, on the occasions that it was, we all made sure the bellies were fully taken care of, as if overfilling would ensure that the experience would last forever. The stranger ate like he was possessed.

He swallowed large chunks of sadza without chewing. Giving all due respect to the man, he did not gormandise the chicken. He only did justice to the sadza, breaking it systematically from the plate, moulding it into neat round balls between his fingers, dipping it methodically into the soup and swallowing it whole without chewing, like he was at war with the food. Mbuya added scoop after scoop of the sadza to the plate from which we were eating. Well after everyone had stopped eating, the stranger continued, *aluta continua*. Sweating profusely, his condition looked visibly better all the same, as compared to when he had arrived. He continued

eating until he had eaten all the sadza prepared for the day, even the leftovers from Father Grey.

After my second offer, Somali Face accepted my drink, Fanta, Fanta Orange.

'My name is Deprive.' She offered after she started on her Fanta. I hadn't asked.

'Deprive?' I asked.

'Yes, Deprive', she said proudly, as if the meaning of 'Deprive' meant pearl.

I wanted to ask if she knew the meaning of her name but decided against it. I did not want to appear patronising.

'Mine is Fatso,' I lied. It just seemed the right thing to do when with a woman at a pub, give her a false name.

She nodded at me and smiled for the first time. A smile decorated by the whitest, most even, teeth I had ever seen.

'You look like you are new to this place,' she remarked.

'No, I was born and grew up here.'

'I have not seen you here before.'

'That's because I work out of town, overseas.'

'Oh, I see. Where are you based? Botswana? Johannesburg?' She asked as if Botswana and Johannesburg were the only two places on earth people could go.

'London.' I said with pride, 'London' standing for the whole of the UK.

Deprive beamed with excitement, as if I had just proposed marriage to her.

'Oh my god, I have never met someone from London before. My uncle went there sometime in the nineties but we never heard from him again. You are so lucky.' She added, with no attempt to hide her admiration. Admiration for someone who had achieved in life, someone who had made it, as though merely going to Britain was synonymous with Hannibal's crossing of the Alps with elephants.

'A cousin's cousin was saying merely picking pieces of trash from the streets can earn one zillions in London,' she chattered on excitedly. In her mind she seemed to wish for an angel to seize her and drop her onto the streets of London, to earn zillions, from picking trash from the streets.

We all live our own dreams. And it is good to let each and every one of us dream theirs. I did not want to shatter this woman's dreams, so I said nothing about the streets of London. Indeed I had lived that dream myself, for a long time. Until a Boeing 737, with the Union Jack painted on its tail, swallowed me whole and spit me into the eaves of the Great Country. The only country with 'Great' in

its name. The land everyone in my country dreamt about, the land of plenty, the land of milk and honey, the land of the queen and dukes and knights.

Somali Face, feeling more comfortable with me, had asked if she could have another Fanta, and chips as she was hungry. Her wishes were granted. It was only when the second Fanta arrived that I noticed she was drinking Fanta. I had seen she was drinking Fanta but that had ended in my eyes. Was she different?

'You don't drink beer?' I asked, careful not to sound judgemental.

'No, I don't drink. You? Do you always drink strong stuff?'

'No. Why?'

'What are you drinking?'

'Coke.'

'Plain?'

'Aye, I mean yes just Coke.' I said, furious at myself for having let the Scottish 'Aye' slip out of my mouth.

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Are you drinking coke?'

'No, no, no.' I said defensively, not sure why. 'It's not for religious reasons or anything, I just don't like alcohol.'

'So you don't drink at all?'

'I do sometimes, when I am with friends.'

She nodded.

Deprive and I got up to dance on a couple of occasions. For the bigger part of the evening we

were rooted to our chairs, nodding our heads and mildly tapping our feet in response to Oliver's lyrics and fidgeting in the chairs in anticipation of the next songs.

At around two a.m., I glanced at my watch, a present from Graham, and got up to go.

'I have to leave now,' I said to Deprive, 'I have a flight to catch this morning.'

She did not respond. She looked at me as if she was about to lose the most prized possession she had ever had.

'Can I ask for a favour?' Her voice now sounded desperate.

'Sure, if I can.'

'Can I come with you? I don't have anywhere to sleep tonight.'

'What do you mean you have nowhere to sleep?' Did you not come from a home?'

'I came from Marondera.'

I understood the desperation. There was no way she could find public transport plying the seventy kilometres or so to Marondera at that time of the night.

'I am sorry, but it’s inappropriate to take you to my bed. Maybe if you stay until the end of the show you might get a client.'

'I really don't care about that. I just want a bed to sleep on and wake up safe tomorrow morning.'

'But you came all the way from Marondera to look for business,' I said. Not a question, not a statement.

'Yes, but this is only my second week of doing this. I am still very nervous. Last week I went to Hatfield with some joke too drunk to know where

the organ he intended to use was. He ended up kicking me out of his flat at three o’clock in the morning because his thing had refused to stand. I don't feel like going with some unknown drunk.’

'But no one forced you into this.'

'You don't understand. You never would' She said in a low voice. Not incriminating. Not even angry.

'What don't I understand?'

'I have a three year old daughter to look after. Her father dumped me, soon after he knew I was pregnant. My parents, elders at a local church, chucked me out of their house as soon as they knew I was pregnant. I was in form three at Marondera High School when this happened. I had to drop out of school. I found one room to rent in Dombotombo. I had found a job at Proton Bakery until three weeks ago, when I got retrenched. A cousin brought me here to the TK for the first time.

Was I in a position to judge? Even if I was, did I have the right to? For a moment or two my mind strayed to Diane. How was she faring with the baby? Did she feel any different to this woman because she had more resources at her disposal? I quickly banished the thought aside and convinced myself that I should not lead myself to the gallows for the death of someone who voluntarily ran onto my fully-drawn dagger.

I felt sorry for the woman. I was only human. Even the most ruthless of killers sometimes feel sorry for their victims. Like the lioness in 'A Lioness's Heart', the touching National Geographic Channel documentary on a lioness which adopted wildebeest calves.

'Please take me with you,' she had pleaded, almost begging

.

'OK, But let's make things clear from the beginning, this is not for business, and nothing will happen between you and me when we get to my hotel room.'

'Could you at least give me money for a lift back to Marondera once it's day time?'

'I am happy to do that.'

'Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much Fatso.'

That was so touching, the gratitude.

We took a taxi to my hotel even though it was only a short distance away. With the way things were in Harare one could not risk walking in the city at that time of the night.

When we got into the room and I put on the lights I got to see Somali Face clearly for the first time. She was stunningly beautiful. Eighteen or nineteen. Twenty maximum. She wore a purple silk top with a matching velvet skirt, not revealing. Just a normal young woman, going shopping, out to eat or even to church on a Sunday.

There was one bed in the hotel room so we had to share.

'You don't mind if I remove my clothes do you?' If I sleep in them they would look like they have been chewed and spit by a cow when I wake up.'

I laughed at her attempt at humour. Cows don't usually chew clothes.

'Wrap a towel on, that should be fine.'

I stripped into my sleeping shorts, in the bathroom, and jumped into bed leaving space for Somali Face to slip in. I faced the other way and prayed that sleep would snatch me away instantly, it didn't. It had other ideas.

'Deprive finished taking a bath, a long quiet bath, and walked into the room wrapped in a towel. I turned my head round, curiosity. Her body looked smooth and young and her breasts erect in her poor quality bra. I would never have guessed she had a baby had she not mentioned it to me. The lights

were off but there was enough light coming from the reading lamps to display her piercing beauty: A silhouette of an astoundingly attractive, sharp femininity.

I wondered how on earth a sane person could have dumped such a flower, a rose

She looked uncomfortable as she walked towards the bed: Like a young girl entering into a forced marriage. She slipped into her side of the bed, said a soft 'good night Fatso' and faced the other way. I turned and faced where she was and said good night back.

'Do you really think there is anything wrong with me?' She asked and turned round to face me.

'No, no, no, why?'

'So why are you doing this to me.' She sounded like she was crying but I couldn't tell for sure.

'Come on don't be like that, there is nothing wrong with you.' I said and reached for her shoulder to comfort her.

Our bodies touched.

Her warm body felt like an electric blanket in a cold night. It was instantly electrocuting, an enjoyable electrocution no scientist can re-create. The crying, or fake crying, stopped, the talking stopped and the brains shut down like those of geckoes in a very cold winter. Hormones awakened from their slumber and crisscrossed different body parts like elite soldiers during a foiled coup détente, sending messages to relevant body organs. From there on nature took control of events, physiology dictated the pace, while biology simply obeyed like brainwashed disciples of a religious guru.

It was all over as soon as it had started. It had taken just over thirty minutes. Then the reality struck. The reality of what had just happened. I felt like a copse after it had just committed suicide. That point where you hate yourself but it's of no use. A

point of no return. Like spilling the only drop of medicine you have to save your sick child. I wanted to kick myself, slap myself, everywhere, anywhere, where it hurts. How could I be so weak? I hated Oliver Mtukudzi for having held his show at the TK Hotel. I hated the TK hotel for allowing 'these' people to throng the hotel. In this day and age? I hated the 'ugly, horrible, evil, conniving, fiend' who lay still, fast asleep in my bed. The bed I had paid for with my own hard earned money. How could she have tempted me like that? Like Satan to the Lord in the desert. But the Lord had stood firm, and told Satan to get behind him, for a whole forty days and forty nights. And I could not even resist once. One episode: A thirty minute encounter. I thought about my brother and how we had filled his new dwellings with soil. Six feet under. I thought about Mupi and how I had preached to her about my values, the virtues of being educated, Scottish Education. In my world of the moment the words 'HIV POSITIVE' were encrypted all over this 'bitch' that lay shamelessly naked in my bed, the towel lost somewhere inside the semi-clean white bed sheets.

Anger ascended up my throat and sat at the apex, like a fish bone, firmly lodged and refusing to budge, holding my throat to ransom and suffocating me. I was not aware I was capable of being so angry. It was that sort of anger that one feels after they have just slapped their own mother. Angry at her because she had pushed you too far -- pushed you to where no man in his right mind should ever go. Oblivious to the turmoil in my brain, my nemesis lay still, as if nothing ever mattered to her in life.

Still angry and cursing, I dumped a bag of Zimbabwe dollars for her on the bedside, took my language and headed to the airport for my early morning flight -- back to Scotland.

Chapter 21. The Shitting Seagulls

It was an atypically sunny January day in Aberdeen. The notorious seagulls, unperturbed by the chilly winds, glided joyously above the Granite City, shitting, peeing and vomiting everywhere as if they and they alone had a right to the city of Aberdeen. A few foot soldiers from the army of spectators, red army, walking briskly to Pittodrie Stadium sulked and swore as they dodged this way and that to avoid the unprovoked bombardment from the kings of the Aberdeen skies, the seagulls.

It was a hell of a fixture. Aberdeen, the Dons *versus* Glasgow Rangers. The whole town was talking about it. Only a Celtic *versus* Glasgow Rangers, The Old Firm Match, was a bigger fixture in the Scottish Football calendar than an Aberdeen *v*. Rangers game. I walked briskly along with the flow of traffic. Excited Traffic. Men on a Mission. A multitude in excess of fifteen thousand going to sit for ninety minutes ,watching a small round thing

being chased and kicked by full grown, sane men with the watching multitudes competing to out-shout obscenities at opposing supporters.

I was proud to be party of the brilliant coloured red army, to belong. I was a lone black face, black kinky hair protruding like the protrusions of a fully grown porcupine, a black neck wrapped in a red scarf, one black foot in front of the other, treading along, among the most royal of fans in the game of football. I wanted to convince myself, to convince them, that I belong, that I was one of them.

Graham had gone to Edinburgh to be with his dwarf girlfriend. It was Graham who had introduced me to Aberdeen Football Club. The Dons, the locals called the team. Graham and I went together whenever Aberdeen had a home game. I sacrificed my job every other Saturday to watch Aberdeen play at home. Now I had gotten hooked to the team, to the game. Like a teenager getting hooked to drugs. I didn't know football was addictive. Like cocaine. Nicotine. Alcohol. It plants itself in the brain and then one starts thinking football.

Dreaming football. Sleeping football. Eating football. And for those who allow it to consolidate too deeply inside their medulla oblongata they even date football. Dating football like some super model from an online dating website. On the day in question I walked tall, alone, among the crowds. I walked to the revolving door and walked straight to my seat. Seat G16, Merkland Stand.

On the first day that I went to Pittodrie Stadium, I had marvelled at how organized things were in the stadium. There were chairs to sit on and not rough concrete slabs littered with groundnut shells. When the giant national stadium in my country was completed and handed over to the government by the Chinese company contracted to do the project some friends and I went for the official opening. I had gone home with holes on my trousers after sitting on an overly rough part of a slab.

The seats at Pittodrie stadium even had numbers on them. Like a huge cinema house with a central screen. Two huge Aberdeen fans sat immediately to my right. From the way they were singing, shouting

and dancing, they were obviously flustered. Drunk like two overfed fishes. They started singing even before the teams walked into the stadium, well before half of the spectators took their sits.

At half time Aberdeen was winning. It hadn't happened in a long time. It was not since Sir Alex Ferguson himself; the famous Manchester United Manager; was still at Aberdeen that Aberdeen had beaten Glasgow Rangers home and away. When the half time whistle blew the fans went wild. The two big guys on my right chanted, shouted, sang and took the rest of the stadium with them. *Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Aberdeen, A-a-a BeDeeen!*

I was one of the supporters. I belonged! So, I chanted and sang along.

It was only after the game had restarted that I saw one of the big guys pointing a finger at me and laughing.

'Lad, are you happy?' He asked with no hint of cynicism.

'Aye, Aye,' I answered him with a perfect Aberdeen accent.

The whole row, including those above and below, and those within earshot laughed.

'Perfect accent, one of the older folk sitting above me said.

'Thank you,' I shot back at him, as if merely having a Scottish accent was an achievement.

The game went on. Aberdeen was holding on to dear life.

'The big guy leaned toward me again and asked 'Lad, are you a Rangers supporter?'

It was at that point that I realized he was being sarcastic, so I did not answer.

'Dude, I said are ye a Rangers supporter?'

'I am wearing an Aberdeen jersey,' I remarked back at him.

'I can see that,' he said. 'Do ye think I am blind?'

'Lad. Why do you support Aberdeen?' The second man asked. Not hiding the fact that he considered it inappropriate.

I did not have an answer. But I did not like the way things were going.

'Next time, I suggest you do not come here lad,' the fatter of the two said, looking at me with eyes as red as the red jersey he was wearing. 'You can support any team you like in England or in Nigeria, or wherever,' he said 'Even in Glasgow. But nae here in Aberdeen.'

I should have learnt to keep my mouth shut but I couldn't. I could tell the people around me were very uncomfortable with the way this conversation was developing.

'Why should I not come here?' I said, without putting in any effort to disguise my accent.

'What?' He said frowning at me.

'I asked you why I shouldn't come here.'

He looked at me, and then at the stadium and then at the players, as if showing me a spectacle. After a moment's pause, enough time for it to sink in, he simply said 'Look at you, and he looked away.

I did, I looked at myself, very carefully. I stood up, got off my seat, ignoring the obstruction complains from those behind me and walked out of Pittodrie stadium like a leper.

When I recounted this incident to Graham he denied that could have happened at Pittodrie.

'No way mate; we Scottish people are not like that.'

'What do you mean? I just told you what happened to me.'

'No, I am not denying that it happened. My guts feeling is that the fat assholes you are talking about were English. You know the English are assholes.'

I never set foot at Pittodrie Stadium again.

Chapter 22. God's Own Country

The family waited for the grand homecoming: The village waited for the triumphant entry. The region waited for an exuberant return. The coming of a messiah, a saviour, a redeemer, their knight in shining armour. They all anticipated imminent change. One of their own, gracing the parliament in Harare, masterminding the building of new, wide, smooth, tarred roads to the barren, sandy, sun scorched villages pummelled by overcrowding and tormented by drought. Increasingly, the unfertile land, battered by unrelenting bouts of drought, had been giving less and less. When I was growing up most families in my village and surrounding villages produced enough food to last them through to the next harvests. Now, year after year every single household, including those who had been renowned master farmers, by village standards, relied on handouts from the glory seeking non-governmental organizations fighting to outperform each other for international recognition.

The whole region could already see large sprouting industries that would give their loafing teenage sons, out of school too early because of endlessly escalating school fees, jobs at the local growth point near Marange Clinic. Some optimistic villagers had already begun selling some hard reared livestock to buy corrugated iron roofing for their mud houses in anticipation of the electrification of the village. Most people were merely enthusiastic about having clean running water. A tap, right in the middle of the dry, sun scorched village. A small token from a child they all watched grow like a fruit tree. Didn't they all go Mbuya for *makorokoto,* birthday celebration, when the boy, Boy was born? Didn't he eat in their own huts with their own children when he was growing up?

The news that I had completed my studies had started circulating in the village well before I submitted by thesis. Sekai said one could almost touch the excitement, the anticipation. Rumour had it that I had read every single book ever written, and

that the queen of Scotland had shook my hand for having achieved so much from such humble beginnings. In the eyes of the villagers, I could move mountains.

When I went back home for Mkoma's funeral I had fuelled their hopes. I told them of how I would change the community the very moment I set foot back in the village. I urged them to pour out their wishes and needs to my all-listening ears, even though I knew too well that beggars would only ride if wishes were horses.

'When you come back home uncle, I want a pair of shoes. I have never owned any,' requested a niece.

'And me, I want a dress, with flowers, like Mr. Matikiti, the grade 5 teacher's daughter,' said another, a niece by virtue of her granny being a friend of Mbuya.

Six other 'nieces' wanted dresses. Five nephews wanted t-shirts. A dozen bare-bellied boys wanted a soccer ball. The real thing. A ball they would play

together during the dry seasons. They would invite boys from other villages to come and play and would make them pay: A small village boys' investment. The money collected would be used to buy another ball when the first one was worn out.

The request for a ball had reminded me of how I used to envy a boy who owned a football when we were in primary school. He had a ball -- a real football. His brother in Harare had bought it for him. During school break periods we would congregate in the school grounds and pay five cents each to play. Bumblebee football. Dozens of undernourished young boys congregating, panting, pushing and shoving each other around the black and white patched ball. Before most of us could kick the thing even once the bell to indicate the end of the thirty-minute break period would go and we would all run back to class.

Mbuya said she wanted me to bring back a suit for her to wear at my wedding whenever that would be. Uncle said he wanted a heifer to replenish his stock, dwindling from the ravenous droughts,

striking the region with regular savagery and impunity.

A couple of enlightened teenage cousins requested that they come and live with me when I got back and acquired a big, plush house in one of the elite suburbs in Harare. Gunhill, Borrowdale, or Bluffhill. I had listened to all the requests and took them in. Deep down in my inner soul the big question mark had sown. Whether anyone with a functional brain, in his right mind, would leave Scotland to go back to darkest Africa.

When all the Chapters of my thesis were finally written, I was sure that there wasn't going to be a house in Gunhill, Borrowdale, Bluffhill or any of the Harare suburbs. I had put all I had into my thesis, which had left me drained both physically and emotionally. I knew I had done a good job and was confident my supervisor would be pleased with my work. Still, I shuddered at the thought of submitting the thesis. The completion of my studies meant the expiration of my study visa in Scotland and I would have to pack my bags and go. It felt

like the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone, completing his studies and going back to his own country.

I pondered about the options I had to stay in the country. There were a few options at my disposal. Many Africans I knew who had been in similar situations before had enrolled for other courses. A Malawian pastor with a PhD in Theology had enrolled to do a course in Carpentry at Aberdeen College; then enrolled to do Hotel Management and Catering at the Robert Gordon University before finally settling for nursing. Nursing saved many souls. Three of my friends from the University of Zimbabwe, an Accountant, a Pharmacist and Veterinary Surgeon had all found refuge in nursing. The National Health Service exempted nursing students from paying fees and even paid their allowances. More importantly, they were guaranteed jobs and leave to remain in the country when they completed their studies.

Some folks had simply vanished into thin air like Shakespeare's witches in Macbeth. One of my

closest friends who had had enough of enrolling for courses he didn't need at Aberdeen College simply packed his bags, got onto a Stagecoach bus and disappeared into the multitudes of Greater Glasgow. Once he moved to Glasgow we seldom communicated and he never came back up to Aberdeen. He had to be cautious. One in such a situation never knew from whom that anonymous letter to Home Office would come. On one of the few occasions he called me he had wanted advice. His mother had passed away back in Chitungwiza but if he left Scotland then he would not be allowed back into the country. I did not know what advice to give him, whether to go home, or to let his own mother's funeral pass, as if there would be a second one. I told him I knew of a girl in his situation who had gone back to Harare and returned with a new identity. The authorities in Scotland, however, were getting tougher, leaving no guarantees that he would be able to get back into the country if he left. He had decided to stay put and mourn his mother's death in solitude, among the multitudes of Glasgow.

The more adventurous folks got married to British women. Scope, a Bulawayo joke who claimed he had a degree in surgery, though he did not know what a suture was, hooked up and married a 53 year old Aberdeen business woman. They even got married in church. Scope was hardly thirty years old. After two years in the marriage and getting his papers sorted he had simply vanished and moved on, down south it was said. Such incidents were so much on the increase that our pastor at the King Street church had even preached about it. For the credulous and naïve Aberdeen women to be wary of getting into holly matrimony with young African males whose agenda was no other but to stay in the country. During the sermon I had wondered why women were so gullible. Was it sheer stupidity? Some of these women reminded me of the goats back in the village. If a predator, say a hyena, walks towards a group of grazing goats, they would all stand there and stare, until one is caught, then they would all flee, as if they wanted assurances that the danger was real. After one such incident one would think they had learnt their lesson, but alas, no, the

next time such a thing happens again they would again stand and stare.

Getting a proper job was the preferred option for staying in Scotland but I knew this was near to impossible. To start with, your prospective employer would have to prove to the Home Office that there was no local candidate qualified for the job they were offering you and prove that you were the best candidate for the position. To make matters worse European Union candidates were considered 'local' for employment purposes making the task of landing a proper job completely out of the question.

My easiest option, at least in the interim, was to postpone the submission of my thesis. Extending the submission of a thesis would only attract minimal penalty from the University, whereas enrolling for a new course would cost a minimum of at least six thousand pounds. A potential problem with deferring the submission of my thesis was my supervisor. What would I tell him? To him, it was important for foreign students to go back and put into practice what they would have learnt in

Scotland. For me staying in the Scotland had become the most important objective in my life at the moment. I spent some time crafting some new research ideas to add to my thesis, which my supervisor thought were unnecessary but was okay with.

After I got all my extension papers prepared at the administration building in Old Aberdeen, I hopped onto a Stagecoach bus early one Monday morning and headed for the Immigration Offices in Glasgow.

As soon as the offices were open, I was in. There were a few other foreign-student-looking people waiting outside but I was the first inside.

'How can I help?' a middle-aged man, with an English accent asked me. His facial expression portrayed some predetermination to give me an unpleasant time.

'I would like to extend my study visa please,' I announced, trying to look relaxed and casual.

He extended his hand and received my documents. He took his time analysing each statement, the photos, the handwriting, and even the spellings. While he was doing this I became afraid, afraid of the future. What if my request for a visa extension was declined, could I really consider the option to go back to home? My brain was a hive of activity. I looked at the man as he continued analysing my documents. He was a bit plump for his height, with a sagging neck that seemed too cumbersome for the Liverpool FC necktie that hung too low along his belly. His head was beginning to bald and creases showing on his frowning, unfriendly face appeared to go all the way up to where his hair began receding.

'Why couldn't you finish your studies on time?' he began, almost making me stammer due to the abruptness and curtness of the question.

'I am almost done sir; I need a little bit of time to tie up bits and pieces.'

Immediately after I had answered the question I felt that was a lousy answer. I needed to be more thoughtful with my answers.

'So why do you need a whole year to tie up little bits and pieces?'

I hesitated. I had not prepared for this question. I had not seen it coming.

'My supervisor thought I would need to redo some of my data collection,' I lied.

'That would hardly be bits and pieces then, would it?'

I did not answer. I just stared at him. The proceedings had gone according to plan.

'Have you been working whilst on your studies, sir?'

'No sir,' I lied, knowing it was illegal to work if you were on a student visa.

'So when exactly do you intend to go back to your own country?'

'As soon as I am finished, sir. Hopefully early next year.'

'Don't you think that will be too late?'

I hesitated, 'Sorry, I don't understand, too late for what?'

'For the farms! Don't you think all the land will be gone if you delay going back to your country?' he said, portraying not the slightest hint that he was being cynical.

I did not want to offend him so I kept quiet, and looked down.

'There are too many people coming into this country from your country. Educated people like you should go back and sort out the mess back in your country.' He looked at me and for the first time seemed really angry.

After about ten minutes of lecturing me about the principals of democracy, I saw him lift his stamp. I felt a huge relief. He stamped my passport, wrote something in it and said 'Sir you have got one month to complete your studies.'

He threw my passport back at me and called for the next customer.

I stood there, for what seemed an eternity.

'Sir, please collect your passport and leave. Other people are waiting to be served.' Mr Liverpool Tie said.

I wanted to argue that I had given him all the necessary papers required for my visa extension. But the incident had sapped away my energy. I

walked out of the office and sat down at the door steps to reflect. A huge black security guard with deep Glasgow accent told me to move it and I obeyed.

I walked slowly towards the bus stop. I only came back to my senses when a grey Ford Mondeo screeched its tires and swerved to avoid hitting me.

'What the hell do you think you are doing?' the driver shouted at me, fuming with anger. Absent minded, I had walked right onto the busy road.

'*How low can I stoop*'? I asked myself. I had almost got myself killed because of a visa. 'T*hey can all burn in hell*. *I have a country to go back to,*' I said aloud, but deep down in my heart and soul, I knew this was a lie. Home was a place to visit, a place to repatriate one's hard earned cash, to be nostalgic about, to phone to so as to brag to everyone about the good the life in good life in this great country, God’s own country.

Chapter 23. The Good City of Glasgow

I got onto the sleeper train and moved to London, just like that. As if I'd had no life in Aberdeen. No planning, no preparation. I knew a couple of Zimbabweans who lived in Golders Green, North London. They were not close friends, but in 'war time' anyone who is not a foe is a friend. When one shares common problems with someone else, the understanding is infectious, instant. After I left the immigration office in Glasgow, I had called More and Grievous, friends I had known via an internet site for Zimbabweans and briefed them of my predicament. 'Move to London,' they had both said. As if going to London was as simple as going to one's kitchen from one's living room.

The very next day I did exactly that. Packed my bags and went London.

When I arrived, I found Grievous waiting for me at the tube station at Golders Green. He looked

happy and welcoming, as if I was a long lost brother who had come back home.

When we arrived at their home Grievous told me that they shared the bedsitter with two other Zimbabweans. I was going to be the fifth occupant. The first thing I noticed about the apartment was the very small kitchen. It was so small that I simply could not imagine two people being in the kitchen at any one time. A few kitchen utensils that looked like they had been buried underground with rust and dirt littered the sink. Two middle sized pots, with what looked like leftovers of the previous week's meal, sat on a tiny refrigerator in one corner of the tiny kitchen, fungus growing lavishly around the pots' mouths. A pair of white socks, brown with dirt and probably used as dish towels, sat on one side of the sink, throwing forth a stench that probably did the good job of scaring roaches away.

In the living area was a single bed made of wrought iron with a mattress as thin as crispy pizza. *Bemba*, blunt machete, we used to call these beds in high school. In boarding school, having a spring bed

was an honour bestowed to prefects only. Everyone else slept on bembas. I had not thought I would find a bemba in Britain, in that day and age. That thought made me laugh -- a silent, internal, inaudible laugh, which gave no inherent pleasure.

Hordes of jeans and t-shirts littered the top of the bed, resembling the long distance buses that plied various routes between the villages and cities back in Zimbabwe. The top of the buses would be loaded with absolutely everything imaginable a human being could own: Bunches of unripe bananas, new and used wheelbarrows, bags of animal manure on their way to the cities. Crates of brown scud missiles, containers of opaque beer shaped like the infamous missiles of the first Iraq war and appropriately known as such in Zimbabwe, a small calf, a silent goat or a squealing pig, body tied in a sack, head dangling out allowing the animal to cry out for its fear of heights. 'Chicken Buses,' that's what we'd called them. To distinguish them from the Western style coaches, with 'Marco polo' written all over them as if the ancient discoverer himself had come back to life. These

Marco polos did not carry chickens and only stopped at designated hotels and motels in towns and cities. They did not even have a carrier cage at the top. Some of my Masalads friends would rather not travel if they did not have sufficient money to afford the more luxurious buses.

Shoes, underwear, newspapers and takeaway food boxes littered the rest of the living area, like a street in an African city, monopolised by half-deranged street kids. My host seemed to have noticed my discomfort with these living conditions.

'Feel at home *muface*' he retorted. I live here with three guys whose totems are, chaos, disorder and untidy, respectively.' He laughed out loud at his own joke.

I smiled at his ingeniousness. 'The rent for the flat is seven hundred pounds. With you in the picture now, it means each one of us will have to pay one hundred and fifty pounds a month. The big man More, himself, collects the money from everyone.'

I learnt later that the rent for the flat was five hundred pounds, so big man More helped himself to the balance.

'So what are the sleeping arrangements?' I asked, referring to the single bed which was set up.

'Are you kidding me? Tonight you will be the first person to sleep in this bed in a long time.' Grievous said with a hybrid of British and Shona accent. 'Four people call this home but no one lives here, mate. We all have jobs to go to, you know. I, for instance, have three jobs, More has four, the other folks I don't even know, may be five or six. We hardly see each other. We all have very different schedules. That's life in London for a Zimbo,' he stated, and laughed.

I knew. I did not have to be told. That was how all the foreign armies of illegal immigrants were living in the country. With six pounds per hour for a salary, the only way one could afford a car, send some money back home and be able to live a half-

decent life was by having several jobs. In Aberdeen, going to college had cushioned me from this routine. Now, the honeymoon was finally over and I needed to join the real world: A world where sleep was a luxury and home was somewhere you can keep your few possessions under lock and key, not where you lived.

I did not have any money saved when I left for London, so I had to find a job and fast. Big man More had connections. The very next day after my arrival in London he got me a job with a cleaning company that had contracts with ASDA Supermarkets. On my second morning in London, I was already on the job, dusting the shelves, sweeping the open areas and mopping the isles. We started working at three in the morning. By the time the supermarkets were ready to open to the customers, we were all done, the floor buffed and shining and the group ready to move on for the next assignment.

'Have you worked in cleaning jobs before?' The supervisor, a pleasant, obese Yorkshire lady with

the legs of an elephant, asked me this, when More presented me as a hard working man.

'Used to.' I lied -- and hoped she would not ask me for the name of the company.

'Do you have any formal qualification?' Strange question, I thought, as if one needed a bachelor's degree in 'supermarket shelf dusting or isle mopping' to get the nod for a cleaning job.

'Not much education, just ordinary levels.' I stated, looking down at the floor.

How could I have told her that I was a medical doctor with a Masters' degree, and a pending PhD?

She did not ask me about my immigration status. She obviously knew the situation and did not want to risk losing a potentially good worker because of asking 'unnecessary' questions. A good percentage of her present pool of workers was probably in a similar situation.

Over the following few days, Elaine, that was the supervisor's name, grew very fond of me. I was a good, dedicated worker who did my job with all my heart, as if the company proceeds were going into my mother's coffers. I rarely socialised with the other cleaners. When I had conversations at work, it was with Elaine.

I got two other jobs, one at banana factory in Northampton and the other at food processing company in East London. I spent a lot of my time on buses and on the tube, shuttling between one job and the other. Soon, the bedsitter in Golders Green became a store room, a place where I kept my few possessions, just like the other four guys.

A few weeks into the ASDA cleaning job, Elaine asked me if I had ever operated an automated cleaning and buffing machine. The person who previously had this role, Butch, was reckless and over the past few months the company had had to pay 'astronomical' amounts of money for breakages from Butch.

Again, I lied and said I was an expert in operating the buffing machine. The very next day she told Butch that he would be relieved of his 'machine operating' duties and that I would be taking over from him. Butch was furious with this development.

On the first day that I operated the machine, I rammed and broke a whole isle of jams. The next day I smashed another shelf -- but thank-God, there were no breakables on this particular shelf. Elaine had turned a blind eye, even though I am pretty sure she knew I had lied about having operated such a machine before.

Increasingly, Elaine showed clear favouritism towards me, which made me uncomfortable. After scrubbing the floors with the machine she would simply ask me to take the machine outside and clean it while the others toiled with sweeping, mopping and dusting the isles. I would have preferred to join in the cleaning, so that at least I was part of the team.

One morning, Elaine fell sick and failed to report to work. There was no deputy supervisor in place. Like all the other days, I headed straight to the machine room and got on with my routines, filling the machine with water, pouring in the chemicals, and starting furiously to scrub the floor. When I finished the wet cleaning I waited for the usual ten or so minutes for the floor to dry before buffing. After I finished buffing I went to the back of the shop and started cleaning the machine. Butch's voice, hoarse with marijuana, suddenly startled me.

'Dude, can you come and help the rest of us do some mopping?'

I did not want to be rude, but Elaine had told me under no circumstances should I go and clean. I was a machine operator, not a mopper, end of story, Elaine had said. The rest of the folks were lazy overpaid buffoons who could do nothing right but wrap weed in khaki papers and put one end on fire.

I ignored him and carried on with what I was doing, adding a bit more vigour to my cleaning, like it was the most important thing I could ever do.

'Dude, I am talking to you,' Butch said in a voice full of aggression.

'I have not finished cleaning this machine mate.'

'Bullshit and you know it. Bullshit. We are fed up of working our asses off for your salary. Do you understand?'

I knew by 'we' that he assumed he spoke for the whole cleaning team. I did not want to start an altercation so I kept quiet and kept on with my cleaning.

'Are you going to come or you would rather we drag your sorry ass along?'

Again I kept quiet and whistled a tune, pretending to be tough.

Before I saw it, I was on the ground: two blows -- one bang on the nose, the other on the left ear. The second blow must have been the one that brought me down, since I fell sideways. I looked up, panicking, and saw the rest of the cleaners gathered around me. I looked up at them, pleadingly, as if I was the little goat looking at the shining blades of a knife, positioned for the final moment, the kill. When I was little, I used to wonder whether the goat knew, when two men held all its four legs firmly onto the ground, to stop it from kicking, and the killer swiped the knife on a rough stone, to sharpen it, and then the final moment, the knife on its throat, sharp, metallic and brutal. I always looked away at that moment. The other boys said I was a coward.

Once, to prove that I was not a coward I had agreed to slaughter a cockerel. When it started flipping its wings with its head severed I let go. The poor bird ran for a few seconds, headless, bloody and crying for its spilt life. Mbuya had scolded me for being such a silly, cowardly boy. The meat would become tasteless, she said. The experience had left me shaken and upset but it had taught me a

few things, that an animal can live for a few seconds without its head, that an animal can cry for dear life even after death, and that every creature seems to sense the final moment: the cockerel's eyes had pleaded with me just before I sliced its head off.

Butch prepared to launch another attack, his adrenaline gushing due to the gathered audience. I saw him swing a hard, overused, winterboot towards my face. A Sri Lankan female workmate screamed, calling at him to stop. Her scream was too late; my attempt to dodge the vicious attack, too slow. Butch's boot caught my lower jaw and it felt numb. It felt like my jaw had been broken into several pieces. I couldn't tell whether I was fully conscious. I tried to plead with him. 'Butch I--'

'Don't Butch me asshole. Don't think if you can fuck Elaine's ugly fat cunt you can fuck with me.' He was very angry. It was as if I had just murdered his mother.

Fright rather than bravery got me to my feet. We were at the back on the ASDA store, with nowhere

to run. So, I was cornered. A cornered animal is a dangerous one. Before I could knit together a strategy, the guy came charging at me like a buffalo, his breath sharp with the undisguised smell of marijuana. Instinctively I grabbed his foot and the intoxicated man crashed onto the concrete floor like an egg. I thought perhaps every bone in his body had broken. He lay still, on the concrete, like a fresh cadaver.

My heart stopped beating. What had I done? Had I just killed somebody?

'You black shit, what have you done?' shouted one of his friends, charging like a bull elephant overloaded with testosterone.

My nose was bleeding profusely from Butch's first blows. My ear ached and was ringing like an eighteenth century telephone. My face was numb but everything stopped hurting as the thought that I had just killed someone dawned on me. I wished he had killed me, instead.

A British citizen killing an illegal immigrant, what's the big deal? But a junk, illegal immigrant killing a local man going on about his duties would make quite some headlines. I would have been leached alive.

I was surrounded by the whole gang. I tried hard to think of how to get out of being murdered there and then but I came up with no ideas. So I simply stood there, like a snowman waiting to be melted down by natural heat. I said a soft prayer to Mbuya's God, to get me out of this one.

And he perhaps heeded it. Butch moved, getting up and started staggering like a newborn calf. He wasn't in good condition, but the group was not quite finished with me yet. Two came with broken broom sticks, as if they were preparing to thrash a perpetually offending cobra.

Just then it seemed as if the God of Mbuya came to my rescue again. The front doors of the shop opened. The ASDA workers were beginning to

come in. I had not realised that the commotion had taken that long.

I screamed at the top of my voice.

Staggering Butch and his screw of offenders were ushered into the manageress' office.

I narrated my story. Butch narrated his version of the story, which was that I had started the whole thing and had gone on to attack him until he fell unconscious. His marijuana-scented breath told the manager that he was lying.

'Racism is unacceptable in this country,' she remarked. 'Where is Elaine?'

'She did not come in today.' I answered.

My jaw hurt; it was beginning to swell.

'You are bleeding quite badly,' she said to me, 'I think you should be taken to the hospital and then you should go to the police. This vagrant should be taken away to jail, that's where he belongs.

The manageress offered that I be driven to the accident and emergency room, but I insisted I could manage on my own, in Grievous' Ford Escort that he let me use for my early morning shifts. I drove straight back to my apartment, washed my face and took some Panadol.

I applied a bandage, wrapped up my jaw and lay on the little bed.

I was not going to the Royal Infirmary and I was not going to the police. I was not even going back to that supermarket -- not ever. Butch had fought his war and won. I was an illegal immigrant, an alien, and a pain in the neck of all good, law abiding British citizens.

THE END